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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

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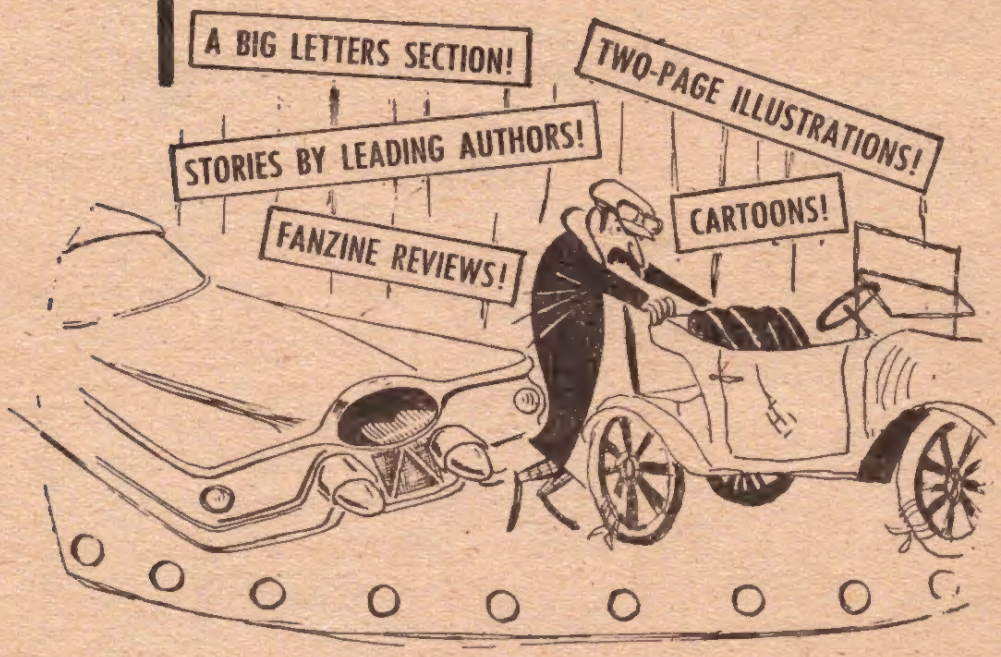

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A ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLICATION

the EYE and I

By C. H. THAMES

You hear a lot of talk about the Universe being a pretty big place filled with a few hunks of matter and a lot of space.

Well, take the word of Mort Starrett that all the galaxies put together fill somebody's thimble. You see, Mort knows the man who owns the thimble!

I

TWO hundred thousand years after Mort Starrett's ancestors, and yours, climbed down from their trees, Mort mounted the small stage in the conference room of the Institute for Advanced Studies and prepared to deliver a speech on the necessity for developing a cobalt bomb.

During those two hundred thousand years which had seen the slow climb of the human race to civilization, the planet Arz had rotated some thirty-six degrees on its axis. On Arz, only two hours had passed.

Mort Starrett cleared his throat and looked down on the rows of faces upturned toward him. The residents of the Institute occupied the rear rows; only VIPs and politicians had been awarded ringside seats. Seated in the very front row alongside her father, Senator Fullerton, Lucile gave Mort a look of encouragement. Mort cleared his throat again. The C Bomb was his baby. If he could convince the VIPs of its importance, he could also convince Lu's father that a senator's daughter could do worse than marry a physicist.

"Hickory, dickory dock," Mort began. "The mouse ran up the clock."

A major general two seats down from Senator Fullerton snickered. A puzzled tide of whispers swept across the audience.

"The clock struck one," Mort said, then gulped at his

To Mort the screams of fleeing men were like the whine of insects.

water glass, added a barely audible "excuse me" and went on: "Simple Simon sits sewing shirts for soldiers."

In the back row; Professor Eisenberg's regal white head lifted and the old man's shrill voice pierced the utter silence which had now fallen on the conference room. "Dr. Starrett," he called. "The bomb. The *bomb*."

"I'm sorry," Mort mumbled, dabbing at his brow with a crisp white handkerchief. For utterly no reason, he had begun reciting nursery rhymes. The facts on the C Bomb were filed neatly and logically in his head. The necessity for the bomb. The feasibility of producing the bomb. The work which had already been done. The work remaining. The funds necessary. The success achieved by the enemy. "I'm terribly sorry," he said again. "Rub a dub dub, three men in a tub . . ."

General Myers' aide, a young first lieutenant, hooted. Some of the younger VIPs snickered. Professor Eisenberg shook his head with great sadness.

Senator Fullerton, a tall sparse man with crew cut graying hair and a confident manner, was the first to stand up. "Plain nonsense coming here from Washington," he muttered. "I have more important things to do."

"Please, Dad," his daughter Lu said. "Give Mort a chance."

Major Littleton, seated on Lucile's right, smiled. "Whatever Dr. Starrett had to drink last night ought to be bottled and put on the market," he said, winking at Lu. Unable to face the smug smile on his face, she turned away. Senator Fullerton hadn't been too subtle about it in the past: Major Littleton, a West Pointer who had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, would be a far better match for his daughter.

"Please give him a chance, John," Lu said.

But Senator Fullerton shook his head. "The major's right. Your ivory tower boyfriend has had his chance. I'm taking the first train back to Washington. I'm going to suggest to Congress that this entire Institute for Advanced Studies be investigated."

Senator Fullerton stalked angrily from the conference room, followed by Major John Littleton. During the time it took Mort to run through Jack and Jill, Mary Had a Little Lamb and Old Mother Hubbard, most of the other invited guests had followed the senator's lead. Professor

Eisenberg sat in the rear of the room, surrounded by a worried knot of his disciples. Lu Fullerton ran to the stage and cried, "Mort! Mort, what is the matter with you? Are you crazy or something?"

Mort shook his head in confusion. He was tall and gangling and wore his hair in a crew cut which should have satisfied Lucile's crew cut father, but the senator maintained Mort was a long-hair in disguise. "I don't know what's the matter," he said. "I knew what I was going to say. I thought I knew. Lu, it was a kind of compulsion. With all those people sitting out there, waiting to hear me talk, all I could do was—"

"Recite nursery rhymes," Lu said in disgust. "You realize you've ruined everything."

Mort was still shaking his head. He lit a cigarette and found his hands were trembling. "I'd better see Dr. Cappell," he said—which, under the circumstances, was a considerable understatement.

"Do the headlines bother you?" Cappell asked several hours later as Mort wiped off the greasy goo which had made the encephalagram electrodes adhere to his temples.

Mort glanced over Dr. Cappell's shoulder at the tabloid newspaper the psychiatrist held in his hands. The headline said:

C BOMB SAVANT SUFFERS BREAKDOWN

Mort grinned slightly. "Well, you're the doctor. Am I crazy?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Cappell shook his head. "If it would make you feel any better, you could probably sue."

"Well, if I'm sane, why did I do it?"

"Your nerves are as tight as violin strings, Mort."

"That's no explanation, is it?"

"No. I don't know why you acted the way you did. All I can suggest is a rest. I know a good san—"

"My foot," Mort said. "I've got too much work to do."

"They can't keep you on at the Institute after what happened. Too much of a stink."

"I'll go away somewhere. I've got plenty of paper work to do. I'll keep busy."

"Mort, we've known each other a long time. You get to know what a friend is thinking. You want to tell me something, don't you?"

"Cap, listen. Maybe I'm nuts. I don't know. Did you ever get the feeling that someone was watching you?"

"Someone? Who?"

"I don't know why. I don't know who. Just someone. Watching me twenty-four hours a day. Like . . . like he was afraid I'm going to do something he doesn't want. He doesn't know how to stop it, but he's trying."

"By making you recite nursery rhymes?"

"Yeah, by making me recite nursery rhymes. Other things too. Like last week, Cap. You will think I'm crazy."

"I'm listening."

"I was in New York. I had to deliver a lecture at Columbia. On my way to the University, I realized I was late. Someone had set my watch back half an hour."

"Someone?"

"Maybe I did it myself. I don't know. Anyway, I began to hurry. Then I got the crazy notion someone was following me. The more I hurried, the more he did. I even remember what he looked like."

"Co-incidence. Two people can be in a hurry at the same time, going in the same direction."

"Let me finish. I was crossing Broadway near a Hundred and Twentieth Street. I was in a hurry. I wasn't looking. This guy following me came sprinting off the curb, shoving me halfway across the street. A truck screeched to a halt, but if the guy hadn't shoved me out of the way, I'd have been crushed under its wheels."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. That was the damnedest part of it. The day was hot. The man was sweating. He mopped his brow and walked slowly away, as if he'd accomplished what he set out to do. He saved my life, you see."

"I think you're overwrought. I still think you need a rest."

"Someone sets back my watch so I have to rush. As if he knows I'll rush just fast enough to get hit by that truck. But someone else hurries the whole way behind me and saves my life."

"And you think there's a connection between that series of co-incidences and the nursery rhymes?"

Mort shrugged. "I think something funny's going on, unless this newspaper is right. You say it's wrong."

"I say you need a rest."

Mort shook his head stubbornly, but promised to keep in touch with Dr. Cappell after he settled down with his work at a small cabin he owned in the pine-bristling hills near Roanoke. Professor Eisenberg was more than

happy to give him an indefinite leave from the Institute. The professor let Mort know, candidly, that it would help the Institute through the rough investigation days ahead.

Followed by his devils, imaginary or otherwise, Mort boarded a B. & O. train for Roanoke.

Only millionths of a second had passed on Arz since Mort had recited nursery rhymes at the Institute for Advanced Study in New Jersey, on Earth. An image transmitter had frozen the action for study, though, and two Arzian scientists who had taken *lubertal* to speed up their sujective time-sense so they could wrestle with the Earth problem were studying the three-dimensional shot which showed Senator Fullerton leading the other VIPs from the Institute conference room.

"So far," Lar Okup said, "we've stopped him."

"Yes, so far. But it's bound to happen sooner or later, isn't it?" Clearly, Prolip Dent did not share Lar's optimism.

"You mean the bomb?"

"Yes, the bomb."

"It had better not happen," Lar said.

"Try and stop it."

"That's our job."

"And ultimately," predicted Prolip Dent, "we'll fail. It seems a shame, doesn't it? That something so small could—"

"Well, it hasn't happened yet. If we could kill this Dr. Mort Starrett—that's his name, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"If we could kill him," Lar Okup continued, "it might never happen."

"We've tried. It's as if someone else were protecting him."

"That's ridiculous, and you know it. No one on Starrett's world is even aware of our existence."

"The man who saved his life when we had it timed for him to perish under the wheels of that truck—"

"Co-incidence," Lar Okup snorted, then turned back to the image transmitter. "Here now. Here's something. "Take a look."

"He's going away somewhere."

"He wants privacy."

"You see," Prolip Dent persisted. "It's hopeless. In isolation, he'll be safe."

"What about the woman?"

"You mean the one called Lucile Fullerton?"

"Exactly. He'll trust her."

"Can we enter her mind?"

Lar Okup nodded, watching

as Mort boarded the B. & O. train on the image transmitter. "We've got to," Lar Okup said.

In her Washington apartment, Lucile Fullerton went to the medicine cabinet and took two aspirins. All of a sudden, she had a severe headache.

II

"YOU'RE home early, Dad," Lu said.

"I've got to pack. They've put me in charge of the subcommittee investigating the Institute for Advanced Study. I'm leaving for New Jersey tonight."

"I'm going away too," Lu said.

"I thought you'd join me."

"I'm sorry, Dad. Mort needs me."

"After what happened, I don't know why you're wasting your time on that boy. But isn't he at the Institute?"

"He's away somewhere. I can't tell you where."

"He needs a psychiatrist, not a Girl Friday. Lu, baby, if you're crazy enough to marry that man—"

"I don't know what I'm 'crazy enough' to do. I'm joining Mort because he needs me."

"There's nothing I can do to change your mind?"

"No."

"John Littleton's been asking for you."

"You know what I think of career soldiers. Besides, I happen to be in love with Mort."

"If you're alone with him and he gets violent—"

"For crying out loud, Dad! Mort's all right. He had to get away from it all. He's going to be fine, you'll see."

"Well, call me in New Jersey if it turns out that you need me."

"I won't need help from anyone," Lu said. But thinking the matter over, she wasn't quite sure.

Formless new ideas were buzzing around inside his head like bees in their hive. The more he tried to concentrate on the C Bomb, the less progress he made. Under the late afternoon sun, the pine-green nearer hills faded to blue and mauve in a long undulating vista of the Blue Ridge mountains. This was the place for privacy, all right. A man could get to know himself all over again here, after the fast academic pace of the Institute. A little stream rushed by the cabin's door, sparkling off among the pines. The cabin was a sturdy two-roomed building, neither

glamorous nor elaborate, but comfortable.

I'm a physicist, Mort thought, not an astrophysicist. But I'm thinking like one of the sky-boys. I ought to call up Murray over at the Institute. I've got enough wild notions to keep him busy for a year. Well, maybe it won't do my mind any harm to let it explore in some new territory for a while. Maybe it's what I need.

"Stop talking to yourself," Lu said.

Mort jumped up, spilling his cup of coffee on the wood planking of the cabin table. "Where did you come from?"

"From Roanoke, silly. From Washington, by train. Don't think I'm going motherly on you, Mort Starrett, but I decided you needed me. No, don't say anything yet. If you're going to try and make me leave, the answer is no. See? You need someone to mop up the coffee after you, don't you?"

"Lu, I appreciate what you thought you had to do, but I've got to work this out for myself."

For answer, Lu went on into the cabin with her two small suitcases. "Do you have an extra cot or something in here?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll sleep in the front room. I'll have coffee ready for you every morning."

"Lucile, listen—"

"I'll listen. But only if you tell me what you were talking to yourself about."

"Oh, it was just an idea. Useless, I guess. Old Starrett's gray matter is acting up."

"What about?" Lu asked as she began unpacking her bags.

"The accelerating decentralization of human cosmology."

"How's that again?"

"Not too long ago, Earth was the center of the universe. That's what we thought, anyhow. Then along came Copernicus to show us the sun was really the center, with the Earth going around it. We were still located in a pretty ideal position, with the sun at the center of the universe, the Earth close by, and the stars surrounding us.

"Along came some guys even smarter than Copernicus to make some more changes. The Earth was not the center of the universe, and neither was the sun. The sun was a small star close to the outer rim of a galaxy containing some two hundred billion other stars, most of them larger, brighter, maybe with larger families of planets."

"What has all this got to do with the C Bomb?"

"That," Mort admitted, "is a pregnant question. Nothing, I guess. Anyhow, for a time we still had center-itus. If the Earth wasn't the center of the universe and the sun wasn't, at least our galaxy was. You know, the famous red-shift in the spectrum. Our galaxy was smack-dab in the middle of things, with all the other galaxies retreating away from it in every possible direction. Now that's been chucked out the window, too. Our galaxy is a slightly larger than average-sized galaxy in the local family of galaxies, or supergalaxy. Center of nothing. Pretty soon we ought to discover our local supergalaxy belongs to a supersupergalaxy of supergalaxies. You start with atoms and work your way up. I wonder . . . I wonder what's at the very top. . . ."

"Mort. You look—peculiar."

"Hey, I'm getting an idea. I need a pencil and a lot of paper."

Mort scribbled formulae all through the waning late afternoon sunshine and on into the evening. When he finished, he looked almost feverish. "I don't know where I'm getting the math from," he kept on mumbling. "I don't know where."

Lu did everything but tuck him in bed. She sat up a long time outside the cabin, staring up at the starry sky. Suddenly, for the first time, the stars seemed incredibly close.

And, Lu couldn't help thinking, unimportant.

An hour after she retired, Lu got up, walked into Mort's room, found his notes on the plank table, took them outside with her, lit a match, burned the papers and carefully scattered the ashes.

"Who gave him those ideas?" Prolip Dent demanded.

"I don't know. Fortunately, the girl destroyed his notes."

"Who put them in his head is what I want to know?"

Lar Okup shrugged. "I didn't and you didn't, that's for sure. No one else on Arz would dare."

"But—"

"Just a minute," Lar suddenly cried. "We're getting something on another image transmitter."

Prolip Dent at his side, Lar watched the second image swing into focus. As the United States did, the Russians had a space station swinging about the Earth in an orbit fifteen thousand

miles up. There was a brilliant flash in the path of the Soviet station's orbit. When the glow did not fade for many hours, Prolip Dent said, "I knew it. I knew something like this would happen. The other side has exploded a C Bomb."

"It wasn't our fault," Lar Okup protested. "With the rigid thought control practiced in the Soviet countries, we couldn't do much tampering. We're not to blame."

"Does blame matter?" Prolip Dent asked bitterly. "We're defeated, Lar. It doesn't matter which side exploded the C Bomb, does it? The effect is the same. Within months, the whole known universe will be destroyed."

For once, Lar Okup's optimism did not manifest itself. For a long time he sat there, staring bleaking at the image transmitter. Finally, he said, "Maybe he can help us?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Starrett. Their universe runs on a different principle, you know. Constant re-creation throughout space. Their whole philosophic-scientific system is predicated on it. So, despite our advanced science, they may be able to do something we can't. Get Starrett. Bring him here."

Prolip Dent shook his head. "It won't work. Starrett will have to work it out for himself."

"He was going to, until we had the girl destroy his notes. It's almost as if someone else were watching him and knew. . . ."

"That's impossible."

"We'll see," Lar Okup said grimly. "Meanwhile, alert the government. Let them know what has happened. But first check the Creator to make sure."

Nodding, Prolip Dent walked to the other side of the room. Unlike Earth, Arz was precisely at the center of its universe. At the very center of the laboratory in which Lar Okup and Prolip Dent were working, the laboratory being exactly in the middle of the planet Arz, was a dull gray ball of matter no bigger than Prolip Dent's head. Upon the gray ball had appeared a tiny glowing dot, pulsing yellow and orange. Around the bright dot, the gray surface of the ball of matter had blackened.

"The Creator's going," Prolip Dent informed his companion.

"How much time?"

"Three or four weeks, I'd say."

Three or four weeks on Arz were many millions of years,

Earth time. But neither Prolip Dent nor Lar Okup was concerned with the almost infinitely rapid passage of time on the planet Earth.

Scientifically, it was a curiosity. But scientific speculation hardly mattered when the entire universe was going to run down and perish in less than a month.

III

"I STILL feel like I'm being watched," Mort said.

"Naturally. I'm watching you."

"That's not what I mean, Lu. You know it's not."

"So, you've got a mild hallucination. It's harmless if you don't get to brooding over it too much."

"It's this thing."

Lu followed Mort's gaze and found herself staring at the six foot cube of dull metal in a corner of the cabin. Outside, rain was drumming on the wooden roof. Thunder rolled sullenly far away, with jagged bolts of lightning bouncing from peak to peak. "What is it exactly?" Lu wanted to know.

"That's what I mean. I was being watched. I was being directed. I built this thing. I'm not sure what it is."

"More hallucination. You built it, so you know. There's a psychological block, that's all. Maybe it's a weapon, some kind of horrible weapon you are afraid to unleash. . . ."

"No. It's not a weapon. It . . . it sends things somewhere."

"Where?"

Mort shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I sent down to the University of Virginia for a couple of hamsters. Maybe I can find out before too long."

"On the radio last night I heard something you won't like."

Mort grinned. "Then don't tell me."

"I've got to. Maybe it will get you back to your old work. Our space station monitored an explosion in the orbit of the Soviet station. Our astronomers at Palomar confirmed it."

"What kind of explosion?"

"C Bomb, Mort. Over two weeks ago."

Mort stared straight ahead, listening to the rain beat down on the cabin's roof. He thought he heard an airplane distantly through the sounds of the storm. He said, "God, Lu. While I've been building this . . . this thing. We could have had it first. We could have had it before they did. I got this crazy notion. I had

to experiment. I didn't know why."

Mort stood up and walked to the cube of metal. There was a door and a small space inside, barely large enough to hold two crouching people. He peered in bitterly at the lever on the inside wall. Just pull it down, and the device ought to work.

Work?

Doing what? As near as Mort could figure, it would transfer whatever was inside at unthinkable speed to—somewhere. He hadn't told Lucile. He wanted to be sure. The math he had worked with was strange. Some days it was lucid, logical, magnificent. Other days he couldn't make head or tail of it. Someone was working with his mind. Someone—somewhere.

That was why he couldn't tell Lucile. More hallucination. She'd been wonderful these weeks in the mountains. If the cube worked, then he could tell Lucile. If it didn't he would go back to New Jersey and tell Cappell to take another, longer, harder look.

Outside, lightning flared. Mort never knew it, of course, but the bolt felled a tree, a giant pine, which tumbled with a snapping, branch-sundering sound, on the special delivery truck which was bringing Mort's hamsters from the University of Virginia. The driver, unhurt, crawled from the cab and stood there with the rain streaming down. The tree's huge trunk had crushed the roof of his truck. When he looked inside, the cage—hamsters and all—had been crushed.

"If he doesn't hurry," Prolip Dent said, "we won't have a chance."

"You can't expect him to try out the transfer unit without sending some experimental animals through it first."

"But you saw what happened to the animals. It will be days before he can get others."

"Maybe we can make him capture some wild ones," Lar Okup suggested his expression hopeful.

"He's no hunter. He has no snares, no traps."

"Well, you're still thinking in terms of Earth time because we've taken *lubertal* to alter our subjective time-sense. A few Earth days really won't matter."

"Every second matters. If Starrett ever gets here, he'll be operating at Arzian time, not his own. And *lubertal* would be a deadly poison to

him. That's why we have to hurry."

"In that case, if we could *make* Starrett enter the transfer unit without waiting to experiment—"

"How do you propose to do it?"

"That's a good question, but . . . Wait! I have it. To the people of Earth, science is still one part logical reasoning, one part black magic. If the hillfolk near Starrett's cabin could be made to believe his work is dangerous, if they could surround his cabin with blood in their eyes, if they could trap him there, intent on mayhem, he'll have no choice but to flee . . ."

"I thought you said they would trap him."

"Yes, yes. That's it exactly. He would have to run, to flee —through the transfer unit, Prolip. Through the transfer unit."

For four days running, the electrical storm returned to the hills west of Roanoke. Hillfolk and farmers had never seen the likes of it before. Run-off water rushed down on the city, washing out the highway to Danville and the other two main roads leading to the city.

Queer doings, everyone said. Jed Lasky, who had lived seventy-four years in the Blue Ridge foothills, had never seen anything like it. Farmers lost their crops to the angry, swirling floodwaters. Twenty-four hours later, downtown Roanoke itself was flooded by three feet of water. There were grumblings and complaints, but the people took it all with stoic resignation until Bob Pauling, editor of the Roanoke *Times*, started the man-made trouble.

"Folks around here get to wondering," he wrote in Saturday's editorial, not knowing exactly why he wrote those words, as if he acted under some strange compulsion. "The storm is incredibly local, having its center some fifteen miles west of downtown Roanoke, right over the Tascomb Cabin on Pine Ridge Peak. Flash floods are rare here, but can happen. We wonder, though, about a flash flood which lasts four days and shows no signs of letting up. According to the *Times*' meteorologist, thirty-six inches of rain have fallen in these four days.

"We would like to point out a strange coincidence. The impossible storm and flash-floods coincide with strange doings at the Tascomb Cabin. A discredited scientist from the Institute for Advanced Study—we won't use the

words 'mad scientist' because we feel they have their place alone in story-books—is carrying on some unknown experiments in the Tascomb Cabin on Pine Ridge Peak. Now, when this same scientist caused the trouble up north at the Institute, a Congressional investigation was immediately started. We put it forth as a frank, open question: if the scientist was kicked out of the Institute by his peers, why should he be permitted to carry on his experiments here in the Roanoke area?

"We'd like to have some answers, and if they're not forthcoming, we ought to go up to Tascomb Cabin and get them for ourselves."

Old Jed Lasky, who had been chased into town from his farm by the flood waters, used the *Times*' editorial as his Bible as he held council in the Blue Ridge Tavern where, since Virginia was a semi-dry state, all the hard liquor drinking was done under the table.

"We ought to go on up there and kick him to hell out of our county!" Old Jed cried in a loud voice.

Fresh with the news of the Soviet C Bomb, the townsfolk had no love for scientists. "Y'all know them eggheads cause all the trouble," someone said.

"Tar and featherin' would be too good for him, experimenting with our weather like that."

"Lousy no account egghead!"

"If the law don't act, we can act. Sheriff Lantry says in West Fork there ain't a thing he can do."

"Come on," Jed Lasky said. They piled into two old station wagons and a jeep and headed west toward Pine Ridge Peak. Gravel-topped and well banked, Pine Ridge Road could handle the runoff better than most. It was slow going, but the three vehicle convoy splashed and struggled along. Many whiskey bottles had been emptied by the time Pine Ridge came into view, looming black and mysterious in the night but glowing like a hump-backed demon every time the lightnings flashed and streaked over it.

"Company," Lu said.

"On a night like this? That's impossible."

"Take a look, Mort."

He went to the window and looked out. The rain was streaming down steadily. Earlier that evening, the roof of the cabin had sprung a leak as the four days of steady

rain worked its way though a weak spot in the caulking. Outside, they couldn't see much beyond the thick stands of pine and the first few yards of the gravel-surfaced road which led here to Pine Ridge from Roanoke, twisting its way among the hills.

Headlights cut a yellow double-track through the gloom on Pine Ridge Road.

"What did I tell you?" Lu said.

"Maybe they're lost. Maybe they need help."

"Then let them come in here and ask for it. There's no sense going outside if you don't have to."

Nodding, Mort watched the headlights. He thought there were several vehicles, one behind the other, but couldn't be sure. He was sure, however, that the car he could see had stopped. There was a quick scurrying of dark wet figures in the glare of the headlights, then, for a few moments, nothing.

"What do they want?" Lu demanded.

"I don't know yet. I . . . hey!"

Something—it was a torch, Mort decided—spluttered and fizzled in the rain out there. It was borne aloft and then hurled at the cabin. Mort could see it spinning end over end in the dark wet night. It struck the wall of the cabin with a clearly audible sound, but there was no chance of the soaked logs burning.

Mort opened the door and peered outside. "Hey!" he cried. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

His answer was a rifle shot. The bullet, fired at an angle, went *whanging* off into the darkness. Lu screamed and tried to tug Mort back inside, but he shook her off. "I don't know what you want," Mort called into the dark night, "but our phone lines are still up. If you try that again, we're calling the sheriff."

Another shot slammed into the wet logs. This one was fired head-on and plowed into the wet wood inches from Mort's face. He was peppered with sodden splinters.

He muttered an oath and shut the door, bolting it. "Ring up the sheriff," he told Lu, and watched as she cranked up the ancient phone.

Suddenly, a face appeared at the dark window. There was a wild, lynch-law lust in the eyes. Mort thought the man had been drinking. The face retreated, but a moment later something heavy struck the window and the glass exploded in at Mort. Instinctively, he shielded his eyes with

his left hand and groped out blindly with his right. He grabbed something, twisted it. There was a cry of pain and Mort found himself holding a longbarrelled revolver. "Keep back," he warned.

There were wet rustlings outside. Mort thought he heard the hurried council of many voices through the rain. He said, "Any luck, Lu?"

"No answer."

"Keep trying, kid." Then he grunted and turned back to the window. Lu didn't need any prompting.

An irregular drumbeat of gunfire started outside. Mort told Lu to sit on the floor, below the level of the windowsill. He crouched there himself and fired blindly out into the night.

"We don't want to kill anybody," an old man's voice called across the darkness. We only want you should get out of here. You don't belong here."

After that, the gunfire increased. Mort smiled ruefully. He didn't know why the mob had surrounded the old Tascomb cabin, but apparently some of its members disagreed with the old man. They did want to kill somebody.

"There's still no answer, Mort."

"Then forget it."

"What are we going to do?"

"I only have three shots left in this thing. I can't hold them off. If we go outside to them, we're liable to be killed before we even find out what's going on."

"Oh, Mort. Hold me. Hold me, please." Lu hung up the phone and came over to the window. The glass remaining in the upper right pain dissolved in splinters when a bullet struck.

Mort turned to see if Lu had been struck by flying glass. She hadn't, but Mort found himself looking at the six foot cube of metal.

Faces were appearing boldly at the window now. Rocks were being thrown. Mort could fire blindly into the darkness, but couldn't bring himself to kill any of these people point-blank. He was still looking at the metal cube he had built when a battering began at the door.

"They'll break it down," Lu cried.

The thick planks of the door were holding, but wouldn't hold for long. When another face appeared at the window, Mort beat at it with the butt of his revolver. There was a cry, a curse, and darkness once more.

"Get inside the cube," he told Lu.

"But you don't even know what—"

"Get inside. I'm right behind you."

Lu walked uncertainly toward the cube. Mort followed her and, when she hesitated, opened the door and shoved her inside. They were probably using a felled tree to batter down the cabin door, he decided. He waited until the door shook and collapsed in toward them, then stooped to enter the cube himself.

When he slammed the metal door shut, it was utterly dark in there. He imagined the mob was stamping all over the cabin floor, but couldn't hear them through the metal walls of the cube.

"Mort, there isn't much air in here."

"We're not staying."

"But, but we can't go back outside."

"I know it, Lu. We're going wherever the cube will take us."

"But you don't know anything about it. You built it on this compulsion of yours. You don't even know if it will work or anything."

Mort got his right hand on the unseen lever and waited. He hadn't told Lu what he thought. He wasn't sure, but if his calculations were right, the cube should transfer them somewhere by doing what Albert Einstein had said was impossible. For Einstein had never actually said you couldn't travel faster than the speed of light. He said it was apparently impossible to travel at that speed because you would need mass equal to all the mass in the universe to do it.

As far as Mort could tell, the device would give them that mass—and send them somewhere.

Lu was so close in the tight confines of the cube, he could feel her body trembling against his. Still grasping the unseen lever with one hand, he hugged her close to him. "I don't know what's going to happen," he whispered. "I love you, Lu. I love you."

"Mort, Mort . . ."

He took a deep breath and, still wondering why the wild mob had come to Pine Ridge and Tascomb cabin, pulled the lever.

IV

"GOD!" cried Jed Lasky. "It ain't dark no more. It's light as day."

"Where's the light coming from?"

"The box. The crazy box."

"Look out. Look out, I say! It's opening."

There was the sound of straining, sundered metal.

Everyone stood around watching. They had never seen anything like it and if they remained alive until the crack of doom, they never would. They waited there for five minutes in the cabin, brighter than day with its torn roof and the keening, wailing sound which shrieked out across the rain-swept hills.

Finally, they started to run. They forgot about the station wagons and the jeep, pushing and tripping one another in their haste to get away. They ran until their lungs were burning and some of them made it to Roanoke that night and some of them did not, spending a miserable night with their terror in the dark hills.

What they had seen were two figures, a man and a woman, both naked, rising phoenix-like from the cabin, which had caught fire. The figures rose—and grew. The figures grew through the roof of the cabin, splintering it. They went on growing until they disappeared upward half an hour later. By then, their torsos and heads were clear through the sullen rain clouds and only the great columns of their bare legs could be seen in the weird, now fading, light.

They were tall enough—and by then easily large enough—to swat down stratocruisers as if they were midges.

And they were still growing.

From the New York Times:

> . . . The four incredible footprints, side-by-side as if two huge human beings had walked abreast for a short moment there in the Blue Ridge foothills in western Virginia, were each more than two hundred feet from the heel-print to the tip of large toe. Great pine trees were crushed like matchsticks where they had walked. As yet, science can offer utterly on explanation for the phenomenon. . . .

"How can we be alive?" Lu said. "There isn't any air to breathe."

"We're alive."

"How can we hear each other talk, with no air to carry the sounds?"

"I don't know. We can hear in our minds. You hear me, don't you?"

"Mort, what's happening to us? Where will it stop?"

He shrugged and, still holding her hand, floated off aimlessly in a new direction. Physical energy was not necessary for the movement. Vo-

lition, the will to move, was enough.

They had felt nothing. No pain, no sensation of traveling, no sensation of growth. They had been stripped of their clothing in the first split-second after Mort had pulled down the lever. The cube, apparently, affected only living organisms. They had still felt nothing as they grew through the roof of the cabin and went on growing until their heads cleared the storm clouds and higher and they found it was no longer necessary to breathe, then higher and larger until, fantastically, the Earth was a blue green ball, house-sized and shrinking, cotton-fluffed with clouds and more until hardly moments after it had begun the Earth had disappeared, a cosmic speck too small for their eyes to see, and the sun was a glowing basketball, then a marble, a midge, a glowing dot among dots, part of the flashing, spinning pinwheel which was the Milky Way Galaxy, which itself became a dot among dots in the greater system, the supergalaxy, with all the dots spinning around a common center and this system in turn shrinking, coalescing until it was a speck among specks in the next highest system of supersupergalaxies spinning around a common center and when this final system took on the appearance of a gleaming, solid sphere, there was nothing else but shadows.

The gleaming, solid sphere became dull gray as they floated up from its surface. Perspective suddenly changed. The shadows were two figures, human, much larger than they. The gray ball, which held all the known universe and was Einstein's infinite but bounded cosmos, still seemed huge. The shadowy figures were hugher, man-like, still unreal, shadow-scientists in a ghost laboratory.

The shadows shrank, became normal-sized. The gray ball, which contained all of Einstein's infinite time, space and matter and to which could be ascribed the limits of his unified field theory, was not much bigger than Mort's head.

"You're Starrett," one of the men said. He looked completely human. He spoke a strange language which sounded like gibberish but the words made sense inside Mort's head. Telepathy? After what had happened and the unknown things which might still happen, it seemed unimportant.

Lu tried to cover her nakedness with her hands. She stood next to Mort on a floor which was suddenly, gratifyingly solid. Their journey, which had made a travesty of infinite time and space, had come to an end.

Lu was beautiful. Her flesh was golden with a rosey glow. It's funny, Mort thought, after all that happened, this is what I think of.

One of the men tossed a robe to Lu and a larger one to Mort. "I am Lar Okup," the man said. "My companion's name is Prolip Dent. We helped you build the transfer unit."

"*Helped* me! I hardly knew what I was doing."

"If infinite mass, relative to his own universe, can be applied to a man," Lar Okup said, "he can leave the fabric of his universe for the higher one. As you have done."

"You hear that, Lu?" Mort said. "Fancy theories have been spun about a sub-universe below ours, but you never heard it suggested that ours might be atoms for some larger plane of existence. I guess twentieth century science made us feel small enough without it."

"Not exactly atoms," Prolip Dent said. "But the analogy is close enough. That ball of gray matter you see is your entire universe."

"I'll feel kind of small once we get back," Lu said, trying to smile.

Prolip Dent shook his head. "There's no going back for you, unless you're interested in visiting a world a few million years in your future."

"A few million—!" Lu cried.

"A lot of space and a lot of time," said Lar Okup. "I thought you knew."

"No," Mort said. Later one would be time enough to share Lu's fright. But now the scientist in him was strongest. "Why did you bring us here?" he asked.

"Because your mote of a universe is about to destroy our own," Prolip Dent said bitterly. "When the larger one is destroyed, naturally, your smaller one will perish with it. But what is many millions of years for your Earth is only a few days for us."

"I don't follow you."

"Prolip and I watch the sub-universe," explained Lar Okup. When we saw true man developing on your planet two hundred thousand of your years before you were born, we knew it was only a matter of time."

"Until what?"

"Until you developed the Cobalt Bomb."

"That's the trouble, the C Bomb?" And, when Prolip Dent and Lar Okup both nodded dolefully: "I don't get it. How can one man-made bomb on a world so small it's part of a whole universe you can probably lift in your two hands have any effect on your world?"

"Different basic cosmology," said Prolip Dent grimly. "What keeps your universe going, Starrett?"

"There's a balance between matter and energy. None of the basic stuff is ever lost without being replenished. For every atom that leaves the ken of our universe, another is created somewhere in our space-time continuum. That theory was first advanced by an Englishman named Hoyle and by the last quarter of the twentieth century, my time, earned almost universal acceptance. It keeps the universe going."

"We don't have a continuous creation of matter in space-time here. For us there is one single Creator," Lar Okup said. "Right at the center of our universe. You're looking at it." And Lar Okup pointed a hand at the dull gray ball.

"My own universe you mean?" Mort gasped in amazement.

"That's right. Every atom which leaves the ken of your universe, to be replaced by a newly created one, enters our universe. Since the restrictions of your universal field no longer apply to the loose atoms, they grow and take their place here."

"I still don't see—"

"Your Cobalt Bomb unleashes an electromagnetic radiation of which you know nothing. Of higher frequency even than cosmic rays, it traps the loose atoms in your sub-universe. What will happen is this: your universe won't lose any atoms; ours won't gain any. In time, yours will be choked, but that's no problem because it lies many millions of years in your peoples, future and there's plenty of room for them to migrate here. But our universe will be starved for new matter. Our suns will grow old rapidly and die. This entire universe will be dead in a matter of weeks!"

"I still don't know why you brought me here."

"We thought with knowledge of your own cosmology, you could convert our universe to it."

Mort shook his head at once. "That's impossible.

There are too many factors. We can't control matter and energy on such a vast scale."

"Then we're doomed?"

Mort exchanged glances with Lu, who had been busy examining the gray ball of matter. "As far as I can see," he admitted at last, "that's right. If what you say is true, you're doomed."

V

UNDER the circumstances, Prolip Dent and Lar Okup were admirable hosts. Mort and Lu, clothed in Arzian dress, were conducted up to the surface of the planet Arz. It was a world of strip cities which alternated business areas with residential areas and small agricultural tracks, a world of pleasant, orderly people. If they knew about the doom which was coming to Arz and all their universe—Lar Okup assured Mort they did—it had no effect on the graceful, unhurried life they led.

"Your world will be choked and ours will be starved," Prolip Dent told Mort one day. "It's doom either way, but your people will have many millions of years to work their way out of it, while we have only weeks and can do nothing. It seems a terrible pity, Earthman. We haven't known war for many millenia on Arz, but it is a weapon of war developed on a far, impossibly small world which will destroy us. Ironical, is it not?"

Mort nodded glumly. There just wasn't time to explain the conflicting ideologies on Earth or tell Prolip Dent and Lar Okup that the power-mad Communists had inadevertently put into effect the machinery which would destroy not one universe, but two.

As they walked along through the strip city which was Arz's capital, Mort permitted the thoughts to come unbidden into his head, Lar Okup and Prolip Dent in front, Mort and Lu behind them, holding hands. Arz had not known war for millenia. Arz had not thought in terms of atomic bombs, of H. Bombs or Cobalt. Arz had not . . .

"Wait a minute!" Mort cried. "I think I have something."

"It's useless," Prolip Dent said. "Our greatest scientists have given up. Oh, they haven't said so in that many words, but there's nothing we can do. And the time approaches."

"Listen. My universe won't lose any atoms, right? But it

will keep gaining atoms through continuous, dispersed creativity, something you don't have on this plane. Right so far?"

"Right."

"Your universe will keep losing atoms without gaining any because of the radiation from the C Bomb exploded on our plane below. Am I still right?"

"Yes. Our suns will lose energy very rapidly, without any means of replenishing it. The universe will eventually run down."

"And the effects of the C Bomb are almost instantaneous? I thought electromagnetic waves travel at the speed of light."

"Ordinarily, yes. But here you're dealing with waves leaving one universe-plane for the next. The laws of mass and energy don't apply."

Mort was suddenly beaming. Lar Okup looked at him queerly. Prolip Dent shook his head and said nothing. Even Lu seemed surprised.

"Don't you see?" Mort demanded. "All we have to do is build a Cobalt Bomb up here on your plane of existence. You're losing atoms without getting new ones, right? O.K., explode your own Cobalt Bomb and you'll stop losing atoms entirely. The status quo would be maintained here indefinitely!"

Lar Okup and Prolip Dent looked at each other. Lar Okup's face broke into a broad grin. He slapped Mort's back enthusiastically and said, "It might work. Starrett, it might."

Prolip Dent was still glum. "We don't have time. The C Bomb is a weapon of war. Unlike atomics, it has no peaceful use. We couldn't develop it in a matter of weeks."

"Maybe I could," Mort said. "I was close on Earth. That was my job."

In a matter of hours, Mort was supplied with a laboratory and the best scientists the world of Arz had to offer. Yes, they could build an Atomic Bomb, although for millenia they hadn't tried. The Atomic Bomb could be made to trigger a Hydrogen Bomb with its heat, provided they could develop the isotope of hydrogen in time. The hydrogen device, in turn, if developed, could be surrounded by a shell of cobalt in isotopic form.

"*Voila,*" said Lu, looking wan but smiling. "And you have a Cobalt Bomb."

Mort spent his first twenty-four hours on the project

without sleeping. The Arzian equivalent of coffee, spiked liberally with a stimulant, kept him going. He had a lot of work to do and hardly any time. The Arzian atomic physicists, accustomed to thinking in terms of breeder reactors and slow atomic explosion for industrial use at first couldn't fathom the idea of critical mass and one big boom. Patiently, Mort explained it to them. Patience wearing thin, he watched them bungle their way through several unsatisfactory experiments.

One by one in the Arzian sky over the past few nights the stars had begun to wink out as their internal engines were not fed any new matter for the so-called phoenix reaction. Arz's own sun, a comparatively young star, was beginning to cool. It was snowing constantly across the face of the planet now, with the suddenly cooled atmosphere unable to hold its moisture.

Twenty-four hours after Mort moved into his laboratory, it looked like his assistants were getting the idea on critical mass and the atomic trigger. He got up stiffly from his workbench and went looking for Lu. He wanted to drift off to sleep for a few hours, just looking at her.

She wasn't in the laboratory.

Neither Prolip Dent nor Lar Okup had seen her for several hours.

A call on the city-wide vidphone failed to get her.

The eternal snows which would fall until all moisture had been sucked from the atmosphere came drifting down in fat white flakes. Arz was cold, ghost-like, sterile with its mantle of white.

Lu had vanished.

Mort had in mind to search for her hopelessly through the great strip city, but wisely, Lar Okup had drugged his Arzian coffee. He fell asleep and dreamed of a great eye watching him, a dream which he had had before, on Earth, and could be explained by Lar Okup's image transmitter. Here, on Arz, it didn't make sense.

When Mort awoke, Lu was still missing.

And he wasn't so sure that business of the watcher was a dream.

"Please," Prolip Dent said. "We have our police looking for her. We can't spare you now."

But Mort shook his head stubbornly. "I have them

working on the atomic trigger. They won't need my help for a few days. I'm going to find Lu."

"Just where will you begin looking?"

That, Mort decided grimly, was a damn good question.

His search, as it developed, had all the mystery of a seance and all the selfless violence of a Kamakazi raid.

On Earth, the Arzians had been watching him. He had seemed the most likely candidate to develop the Cobalt Bomb, and they tried to prevent it. Now he thought of an old Latin question: *Quis Custodiat?* Someone had been watching the watchers. Someone had been trying to protect him. Another faction on Arz? A suicide faction?

It hardly made sense. It was unreasonably logical. Now, could he assume this unknown other faction wanted to make contact with him? If indeed it were a suicide faction and if Mort now was Arz's final hope when before he had been its Nemesis. . . .

It meant he might have to court death to find Lu.

Highway death was too uncertain. Besides, he didn't want to succeed. He wanted to give an unknown assassin, if any, the opportunity to act. He wondered grimly if it would be the same man who, in New York, had been in such a hurry to save his life. Turnabout, he thought. I'm no longer a world-wrecker. I'm a would-be savior. Is that why someone has kidnapped Lu and wants me dead?

At one end of the Arzian strip city capital, a lofty hill soared two thousand feet skyward. On its top had been erected a gleaming tower from which, it was said, could be seen ten thousand square miles of the planet. You paid your admission and took the slideramp up, marveling at the seamless construction of the tower, as if the molten plastic for its walls had been poured into a huge mold and solidified in one piece.

And you stood at the top.

And waited.

The whole of the strip city, following the meandering course of a gentle old river, lay beneath him. Beyond it, the purpling hills marched off in all directions. And far to the south, so far that it might have been an optical trick, stood the vague white glimmering suggestions of saw-toothed mountains.

"I'm the Earthman," Mort said. He told everyone. The tourists come to see this fine view even though Arz's days

were numbered, the guards, the lecturers who pointed out items of interest.

"I'm Mort Starrett, the Earthman."

Most of them had heard of him. A few heard he was going to save them if anyone could. None seemed inclined toward mayhem.

It was but moments to closing time. The last tourist had started on the long way down, the slidefloor gliding smoothly underfoot. The cleanup robots scurried about the observation platform, tidying up after today's tourists and getting ready for tomorrow's. A guard made his final rounds.

"So you're the man from the atomic universe," the guard said. "I couldn't help hearing you before."

"Not exactly atomic, although the analogy is a good one."

"Are you really going to save us?"

"I think so. If you can't get any newly created matter, we'll have to see that you don't lose any of your old matter. It's simple."

"It doesn't sound simple to me. I know my way around up here, and that's all. Say, how would you like a view we don't usually give the tourists?"

"Why not?" Mort said.

"Over here," the guard explained, removing a section of the incredibly light plastic parapet. "The exterior walls are cleaned once a month from this point. Take a look."

Obediently, Mort leaned over. The view was something to see, with the lights of the strip city winking on one by one. The sun had already set, but still gleamed on the distant snow-capped mountains.

With a section removed, the parapet barely reached Mort's thighs. He leaned over, tense, expectant.

Abruptly, something exerted pressure on his back. He felt himself teetering there, suspended over emptiness. He held on with his hands, kicked back with his feet. There was an oath, a scream. Mort whirled and drove his right fist into the guard's face.

The man toppled over backwards and Mort was on him almost before he hit the floor. "All right," Mort cried. "Who are you working for?"

"I . . . you . . . you were falling. I tried to pull you back."

"You're lying." Mort twisted the guard over on his stomach, bringing the man's right arm up and back in a hammerlock. "I can break it," Mort said. "I want you to

talk. Do you know where the Earth woman is?"

"You . . . you're hurting me. Have a heart. I figured we were all doomed anyway and they're paying me good money. I don't know what this is all about, and that's the truth."

Mort wrenched the arm up cruelly until the guard yelled. "O.K.," Mort said. "But you can take me to someone who actually knows what this is all about."

Sweat streamed down the guard's face as he craned his neck to stare at Mort in mute supplication. "Please, listen. Please. All right. All right, I'll take you."

Mort stood up, taking the Arzian stunner from the guard's holster. Wordlessly, he followed the man down the deserted slideramp. At the base of the hill, they climbed into a ground car. An hour's fast driving brought them to a large, spherical residential home midway between the strip city and the snow-capped mountains.

"They're inside," the guard said.

"Who?"

"I don't know who they are, and that's the truth."

Nodding, Mort got out of the ground car. The stunner in his hand, he turned to see that the guard followed him. He was too late.

Exhaust pipes shrieking with sudden accelleration, the ground car sped away.

Mort stalked grimly toward the spherical house.

As he reached the door, it raised open mechanically. A voice blared: "Drop the stunner, Earthman. I merely have to press a button to incinerate you."

VI

WEAPONLESS, Mort went inside. Three men were seated there on plastite floor cushions. Then Lu came running toward Mort from somewhere inside and for a moment he forgot the three men, forgot that he had dropped his stunner outside. He held her in his arms and stroked her hair while she sobbed and breathed his name over and over again. "Mort, Mort. They won't tell me anything. I only know they're holding me so you can't direct the work on the C Bomb for Lar Okup and his people."

"There are forces at large which you don't understand," one of the men said. "You must not meddle. Don't believe you now understand the sum total of everything be-

cause your awareness of a plane of existence greater than your own has been awakened."

It sounded like double-talk. Mort shrugged and decided he could think about it later. "What are you going to do with us?" he demanded.

"Why, nothing. Nothing at all, now that you're here."

"You're going to keep me here, though. So I can't save these people—"

"Yes. You won't be harmed, unless you try to get away. Then we'll have to kill you."

"Tell me this. Are you the same people who saved my life on Earth? Was the man who pushed me out of the path of a truck one of you?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"But nothing. We were. We did. Would you like something to eat, Starrett? Something to drink?"

"Yes," Mort said automatically. The seconds were ticking away. On Earth, the Arzian seconds were monstrously long, almost without meaning. On Earth, the time which had passed was unthinkable. Mort and Lu could never return to Earth.

Arz was his world now, and every Arzian second which passed brought them that much closer to doom. There was still so much which had to be done, and so little time. Without Mort, the project couldn't succeed. With him, in the little time which was left, it barely had a chance.

It hardly mattered if he perished now or in a matter of weeks with the rest of the Arzian universe. The gesture alone counted. He had to make the gesture.

One of the three men returned with a tray of food. Smiling blandly, Mort walked over to it and picked up a large glass with a ruby-colored liquid in it. Still smiling, Mort hurled the contents of the glass in the face of the man with the tray.

The man spluttered, roared something unintelligible. But Mort was already running for the door, Lu with him. There Mort found himself grappling with another one of the men. Give the other two a chance to compose themselves, and Mort and Lu would never get away. . . .

Mort jabbed his fingers at the man's eyes, brought his elbow up against his Adam's apple. Screaming, the man staggered away from the door.

With Lu, Mort waited a split second for its iris to open. When it did not, he plunged through, ripping the thin

plastic like paper. A mechanical voice said: "You will be incinerated if . . ."

They kept running. Behind them, there was a hoarse cry. Mort looked back once, saw the first of their three captors plunge through the doorway. He was transfixed there, as if held by invisible hands. He began to glow, then fade. In seconds, the space which he had occupied was empty.

With Lu, Mort ran outside into the snow.

Coming here, he had hardly noticed it. The roads were warmed by radiant heating, were always clear and dry. But the snow was falling steadily in Arz's too quickly cooled atmosphere, and would keep falling until it buried the planet in its final, eternal mantel of white unless Mort could get back to the city.

"They'll look for us on the road," he cried. "Come this way!"

Stumbling, sprinting, stumbling again through the snow, Lu followed him away from the highway. Arc lights stabbed out toward them from the spherical house. One knifed through the snow in their direction. Without time to yell a warning, Mort tackled Lu and brought her down in the soft snow, crouching there with her, waiting, as the great light hovered and passed on.

His lungs were afire. His legs grew heavier with every step through the snow. Lu staggered in his wake and soon he found he had to half-support her and he plodded doggedly away from the house.

It was dark, wet, cold. The old snow had barely crusted before the new one began to fall. Mort sank in as far as his waist, once floundered in a drift to his neck as he tried to support Lu above it.

The wet cold seeped in, became a part of him. He had always been this way. There was nothing, nothing in all the universe, except the fat falling flakes and the drifts which piled higher and higher and the keening night wind of Arz which made of the flakes tiny stinging needles and the need to get away and the impossibility of escape because in all probability they had been walking in circles and would return to the spherical house and captivity and death in a matter of minutes.

And then, miraculously, a dim dawn glow seeped through the snow. The whiteness was all around them. Lu mumbled incoherently. He

was carrying her now, her limp body slung across his shoulder. He felt nothing, not even the weight of it. He followed the dawn light east and stumbled down a snowy embankment toward the highway. He could not tell how far from the house he had walked during the night. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He could hardly stand on his feet any longer.

When a ground car sped into view along the dry road surface, Mort used all his remaining energy to wave his arms feebly. The last thing he remembered, or thought he remembered, was the car braking to a stop.

"That's it," Mort said two weeks later. "The bomb is ready."

"Will it work?" Prolip Dent asked him.

"It should work. Of course, we can't reclaim the atoms which have already escaped your universe. But you shouldn't lose any more. Here on Arz, winters will be colder, summers shorter. You'll survive, though."

Mort had worked at a frantic pace for two weeks. Lar Okup had provided for around-the-clock bodyguards, although he knew nothing about the people who had tried to keep Mort a prisoner or kill him. To Lar Okup, the thing made no sense at all.

Prolip Dent said, "We have a surprise for you, Starrett."

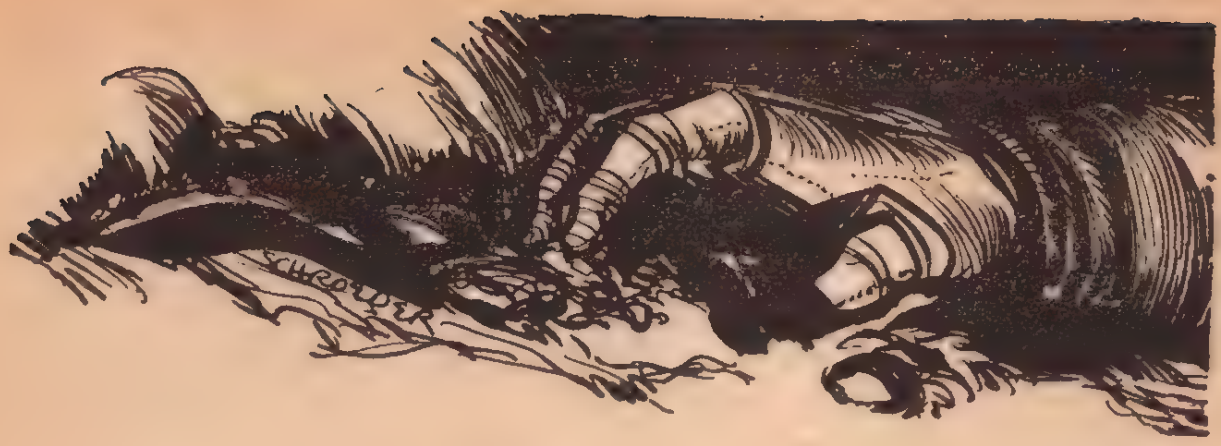
Mort looked up from his workbench and saw—Lu. She had been hospitalized for exposure and shock, but looked fine now. Pale, but otherwise all right. She came over and squeezed his hand and said she wanted to do more, much more, but all Arz was waiting.

"All our hopes . . ." Lar Okup began, but Mort didn't let him finish.

Mort pulled down the lever which would activate the Cobalt Bomb which swung around Arz in a tight, fifteen-thousand-mile orbit. There was nothing at first, then a flash, a blinding glow. Later, much later, the shock wave would hit them. It hardly mattered. Lar Okup and Prolip Dent looked at one another, at the glowing, pulsing radiance on the vision screen, at Mort—and danced a wild jig together.

The C Bomb had worked. The C Bomb radiation would maintain the matter-energy status quo in the Arzian universe. While the Arzian plane of existence would not receive new matter from the Earth plane below it, the Arz-

(Concluded on page 130)



GOLD IS ANYWHERE

By HENRY STILL

They came to the planet looking for gold. They found mountains that were a profile of Thomas Jefferson one moment and a Hollywood starlet the next, trees that grew a hundred feet in ten seconds, cities that rose and fell within the space of a heartbeat. But more than that, they found what they wanted—and hated it!

HARRY TURPIN scratched a pimple under his shaggy gray beard and stared over the jagged range of naked mountains to the hot yellow sky beyond.

A far peak melted into a profile of Thomas Jefferson. A minute later it was a broad, sparkling stream of cold water, cascading down the mountainside.

Harry picked up his portable atomic rock drill and scrabbled up the basalt ledge. But he looked again, puzzled, over the far range.

The mountain was a mountain again, but the tiny sliver of silver was still there in the

The bug's death's-head eyes glared balefully at him.

pulsating yellow distance. It had moved.

"Hey, beetles!" Turpin yelled into the emptiness of rock and sky and shimmering heat.

"We're gettin' company."

No answer. Only a shrill faraway twitter like a cricket in a summer meadow.

Turpin climbed heavily down to the flat bed of lava that formed a narrow valley and home. His old space clunker was there, minus the reactor which he had unbolted to rig up a refrigeration unit for the dome. He waited in the valley and stared at the sky. The silver needle had disappeared.

"Must be seein' things," he muttered aloud. But just then the huge rocket slid around the mountains and mushroomed in for a soft landing.

Turpin watched with a mixture of excitement and suspicion. Two years he'd been away from civilization. He spat on the rock, watching the saliva sizzle away in a tendril of steam.

The space lock opened. Two men stepped out. One was dark and young and dapper, the other sleek and fat.

"Turpin?" the dark one said. "Good to meet you. Not many of the old prospectors left. I'm Rockford Burns. This is Sammy Meropus."

"How'd you know I'm prospectin'?" Harry's blue eyes narrowed.

Burns opened his mouth to answer. He left it open.

Twenty feet away a young maple tree popped out of the ground. Ten seconds later it was a hundred feet tall and still growing. Then it vanished in a bursting bubble and spattered the ground with fragrant drops of moisture.

"What in the hell was that?" Burns whispered. Meropus crawled sheepishly out from under the space ship's port fin.

"Mirage," Harry chuckled.

"Mirage, my foot!" Burns said. "I felt rain drops when that thing popped."

"May be," Turpin said, "but you'll see most anything on old hot rock here. You noticed comin' in she spins around a binary. One of them stars is a Cepheid variable. The other is a white dwarf. There's light and heat mixed up all the time and you never know what'll happen next. Where you from?"

"Galactic Assay Office," Burns said. "We caught your claim filing on the warprad a week ago. Got a good strike?"

"Fair," Turpin said. "Say, wait a minute! The nearest GAO is a light year from here. You made pretty doggone good time didn't you?"

"We were in the sector,"

Burns assured hastily. "Thought we'd drop in to verify your find." His eyes shifted away from Harry's steady gaze.

"They're still usin' it for money, ain't they" Harry asked anxiously. "Natural gold, I mean, not that transmuted stuff."

Burns glanced at Meropus.

"Yeah," Sammy said disinterestedly. "They're still usin' it. Your mine near here?"

"Not a mine. Just a hole," Harry answered, not looking at them.

"How about a drink, old timer," Burns suggested, "you must get thirsty out here two light years away from civilization."

"Sure could use one." Turpin shifted nervously and licked his lips. "Eighteen months, earth time, since I had a slug."

Sammy lugged a case of Scotch out of the rocket.

"Now that looks mighty good," Harry grinned. "Yessirree. Come on in and set. Ain't no point gettin's sunblistered."

He led the way around a heap of jumbled rocks. In the lee of a high cliff a silvery metal dome, 30 feet in diameter, gleamed in the brilliant sunlight. The curving sides seemed to be welded in solid lava.

"How'd you build that?" Sammy asked.

"With the reactor off the ship, mostly," Harry answered.

Burns looked at the ground and yelped in surprise. Across the rock, in almost perfect formation, marched a score of weird insects. The arched backs, an inch in diameter, were striped bright orange and black. The bugs moved precisely across their path and disappeared under a rock.

"Another mirage?" Burns pointed a thumb.

"Nope. Them's beetles. Only form of life around here. They're mighty friendly little beasts."

Turpin opened an airlock in the dome and admitted his guests. Inside it was pleasantly cool. Sammy dropped the case of Scotch while Harry rummaged in a metal foot locker and came up with a pair of plastic cups. He poured them half full and then tipped up the bottle. The fiery liquor gurgled down his throat for several seconds before he stopped.

"Mighty good," he sputtered. Burns sipped his drink and eyed the low level of the liquor in the bottle with satisfaction.

"Nice place you got," Sammy said.

"It'll do," Harry said. "Ain't no place else when that dwarf peeks over the horizon. That's summer like you ain't never seen. She topped off at 1150 degrees Centigrade one day." He tipped the bottle again. "She'll be up late tomorrow. Then for 12 hours everything around here just melts and oozes away, except the hard stuff."

For half an hour, Harry nursed the bottle as he would a beautiful mistress. He hiccuped loudly.

"Where'd you say your mine was?" Sammy asked softly.

"Didn't say. You want to see some gold?"

"Sure," Sammy said. "Sure would." He winked at Burns. Burns winked back.

Harry walked across the domed room to the down-curving wall. He weaved a little as the liquor started to hit. He slid back a flexible panel. His visitors gasped at the gleam of rich, raw gold.

"Good grief!" Burns breathed. "You must have two —three hundred pounds there."

Sammy licked his dry lips and stirred the heap with a forefinger.

"Looks like pencil shavings," he said.

"That's the way she comes out here." Turpin burped painfully and staggered over beside the case of whiskey. Sitting cross-legged and beating tempo on the plastic crate, he burst into discordant song.

". . . lived a miner, Forty-niner, and his dotter Clementine!"

Meropus moved quickly across the room and squatted in front of the prospector.

"Where's the mine?" he said.

"Told you, it ain't a mine. Just a hole. Big hole fulla gold."

Sammy slapped him sharply. Turpin's head snapped back.

"Look, old boy," he hissed, "the fun's over. Where's the goddam mine?"

"Take it easy!" Burns rapped. Sammy stepped back.

They didn't really see Turpin move.

He didn't much, but the gun was there in his hand. It was old, but lethal.

"All right now, get out," Harry said. "Claim jumper ain't born yet that can get a mine away from me. On your way before I decide to keep you here permanent." His blue eyes sparkled with fire.

The two men stumbled over each other getting to the door. Burns fumbled with the con-

trol. He grunted when Turpin jabbed him in the back with the gun.

Outside, the two broke into a run. Harry fired a shot to hurry them along. The high-velocity energy globe cut a neat hole through one fin of the rocket. The ship gouged a big hole in the ground as it thundered skyward.

Turpin chuckled. Burns and Meropus had forgotten their whiskey.

He didn't see the ship land five miles from his camp.

Burns and Meropus slept uneasily in the rocket. Sammy opened the space lock for fresh air, but closed it again, remembering the strange insects that inhabited the globe. They waited for dawn, but they didn't know when or what it would be with both the Cepheid variable and white dwarf lending their influence to the planet's bizarre existence.

Darkness never closed in completely. The Cepheid dropped behind the horizon for only an hour, and from somewhere the dazzling blue-white dwarf cast a refracted halo through the stratosphere.

"Hey, Rock," Meropus whispered loudly. "Let's shove off."

"Might as well," Burns answered. "No way to tell when the old coot will go out to dig again."

They climbed out in the semi-luminous dusk and started back on foot. Within half an hour their feet ached. Spines of lava rock and crystalized minerals chipped at their boots like acres of sharp knives.

"Jeez, Rock," Sammy panted, "you think it's worth it?"

"Shut up, you idiot! We're almost there."

"He ain't goin' to hear us inside that dome."

"He may be up by now. See—" Burns pointed ahead. Morning light was breaking behind a high, ragged edge of mountains.

"That peak's just the other side of Turpin's camp," Burns whispered. They moved forward cautiously. The ground fell away. They were on the edge of the cliff which towered above the silvery white dome.

Turpin was not in sight, but the sound of his unmelodious voice echoed thinly through the morning air: ". . . dreadful sorry, Clementine."

"Must be hittin' the bottle again," Sammy said.

"Hell!" Burns grunted disgustedly. "He could hit it steady for a year and still be on his feet. We learned that the hard way."

He peered over the cliff edge, trying to spot the prospector. Sammy uttered a shrill yelp of alarm.

"What the devil . . ."

"It's them bugs," Sammy whispered hoarsely. "They give me the creeps."

Burns looked. On the rock near his hand one of the huge beetles had appeared from nowhere. It was a big one, its hemispherical shell of orange and black almost two inches in diameter. The growing light glinted from its back as from dull metal. The head was large, with features strangely similar to a shrunken, black human skull. Multi-faceted eyes glittered with diamond lights.

Burns moved to squash it, but the beetle whirred like a tiny machine, leaped into the air and vanished in a jumble of stones.

"There he is!" Sammy whispered. Burns crept back to the edge of the cliff and peered down. Turpin was heading away from the dome toward a narrow cleft in the wall of rock. He swayed gently under the weight of the rock drill and an ancient steel pick.

"Heading for the mine," Burns said. "Let's go."

They scrambled down the far side of the cliff and found the crevice in which Turpin had disappeared. A well-worn narrow path led upward between the walls of basalt which nearly met above their heads.

The Cepheid sun was up now, casting a glare of yellow light up the narrow cleft. Sammy's labored breathing wheezed through the silence.

"Cripes, Rock," he gasped. "I ain't up to this. You know I got an asthmatic heart."

"Shut up and save it or we'll lose him," Burns barked. "There's enough gold on this rock heap to let you nurse that heart for the next 60 years."

They emerged from the crevice on a relatively level sheet of hardened lava a mile wide. Light from the sun pulsated strangely, but they could make out a dancing black dot in the distance—Turpin, as he disappeared into the next rise of tilted rock. Burns quickened his pace. Sammy stumbled along behind.

Towering rocks ahead shimmered in the morning light, their lines changing from distinct sharpness to blurred, foggy outlines. Towers and spines of stone shifted and merged, seemed to move nearer and then fade away. Once the bleak horizon became the skyline of a beauti-

ful city and then transformed in the pulsating light to a dull, featureless plain. Burns guided himself by the sun, estimating carefully the direction where Turpin had vanished without a trace into the front range.

Abruptly the light shifted and they were at the foot of the ridge. They searched both directions for a hundred yards before they found Harry's footprints in a sifting of volcanic ash, and followed into the rock maze. They heard the sound of the atomic drill before they saw him. Burns shoved Meropus behind a huge boulder and peered stealthily around it.

Turpin was working in a pit, shoulder deep, tunneling under an outcropping of granite. A mound of ore was heaped up on the ledge behind him. Sparkles of rich yellow danced in their eyes as sunlight struck the ore.

"Here she is," Burns whispered. Sammy grunted with satisfaction.

"You want me to . . ." He slipped a finger across his throat demonstratively.

"Don't be a fool," Burns whispered. "You don't leave a sign where the probes can find it. We'll take him upstairs and dump him so he'll drift into that white dwarf. It's tough to prove murder without a corpse."

"What do we do now?"

"Use the paradiddle. Put him out for a few minutes."

Sammy checked his diminuitive weapon, pointed and pressed the control. Turpin did not feel the infinitesimal pellet enter his skin, but seconds later he slumped unconscious.

The two claim jumpers ran forward, dragged their quarry out of the pit and stretched him on the ground. Burns turned to the heap of ore. A score of the orange and black beetles milled around the hole, but he ignored them. Meropus searched the paralyzed prospector, pocketed Harry's old gun.

"What the hell—" Burns snarled. He plunged his fingers in the ore pile, tumbling larger chunks aside, and held a piece of glittering yellow to the light. He jumped into the hole and scrabbled frantically with the pick.

"What's the deal, Rock?" Sammy peered anxiously over the edge. Burns straightened slowly and smoked the air with a string of oaths.

"Iron pyrites!" he yelled. "Fool's gold. Every bit of it. Not a grain of gold down here!"

Suddenly he screamed with pain and started kicking his foot like a chicken in the death reflex. A giant beetle flew loose from his ankle, fell tinkling among the rocks.

Burns crawled cursing out of the pit and examined his ankle. The strange insect had bitten out a piece of flesh the size of a pea. The incision could have been made with a scalpel. Sammy tried to stanch the flow of blood, but Burns knocked him aside. With murderous rage he aimed a vicious kick at the unconscious prospector, but before the blow fell he screamed again and threw another insect off the back of his hand.

"Like I said," Sammy breathed, "them little devils give me the creeps."

"They're working with him, Let's get him out of here."

"Wish we hadn't diddled him," Sammy said mournfully. "It'll be half an hour before he comes out of it and his legs'll be rubber."

They picked up the old prospector, found the small body unexpectedly heavy. They struggled down to the level and back toward the dome.

"Why you suppose he was diggin' there if it's nothing but pyrites?" Meropus panted.

"I don't know," Burns said grimly, "but he'll tell us where he's getting gold if I have to burn him."

They were slightly more than halfway back across the lava bed when Turpin groaned.

"He's comin' around," Sammy said. They laid him down on the rocks and waited. Harry's eyes opened, but he closed them again quickly against the glare of painfully intense light.

"Hey, the light's changing!" Burns shouted. Harry tried to say something, but his mouth was barely able to shape the words. Burns leaned near to hear him.

"Dwarf—" Turpin whispered. "Half hour . . . fry you."

A look of horror spread across Sammy's fat face. He started to run.

"Come back here you idiot!" Burns collared him. "We'll make it to the dome and he's coming with us. Grab it and let's go."

The two men, burdened with the dead weight, ran clumsily across the flatland. The Cepheid was high in the sky. Across the horizon a white glare heralded the dawn of the dwarf.

Sammy was in the lead, staggering under the weight of the torso. Suddenly he scream-

ed with terror and surged back.

A tremendous chasm opened at his feet.

"What is it?" he blubbered. "What the hell is it, Rock?"

As they watched, the chasm grew wider and deeper until it stretched away in a mammoth canyon below them. Trees grew at the bottom along a wide sparkling river. The sheer rock wall dropped away 2000 feet or more.

Turpin struggled to sit up.

"Mirage," he muttered, "nothing but a three-foot drop-off."

"Sure," Burns said softly, "a mirage. Try it Sammy."

"Not me," Sammy whined, "I ain't goin' another step."

Burns pulled a burr gun out of his belt.

"I said *try it* Sammy."

Trembling with terror, Meropus licked his dry lips and turned. He hesitated at the cliff edge.

"Move!" Burns bellowed.

Sammy stepped forward. And vanished from sight. His mortal scream trembled in the air, cutting their ear drums like the shriek of a rocket.

"You devil!" Burns jammed the gun against Harry's temple. "I ought to kill you, now. You and this hellish planet! Show me a way around that canyon. Quick!"

"Look." Turpin pointed.

Burns turned and stared. The chasm had closed. The lava stretched away in an uneven plain again, with the wall of rock in the distance.

There was only a three-foot dropoff.

At the bottom Sammy's body lay twisted, his face a hideous, purple mask of horror and death. Burns leaped down and grabbed his wrist.

"Heart," he muttered. "I knew he had a bad heart. All right. That makes just one of us. Now get on your feet and move."

Harry tried to stand, but his legs melted under him. Daylight was glaring white now, tinged with blue, and heat waves shimmered in the upper atmosphere.

"Go on!" Burns screamed hysterically. He jabbed Turpin with the gun.

"Can't yet," the prospector gasped. "We can't make the dome. The dwarf will be up in ten minutes. Where's your ship?"

Burns explained as best he could where he and Meropus had hidden the rocket.

"It's over the hill to the left," Harry said. "Here, help me, quick." He leaned on the claim jumper, hobbling along as his legs gained strength.

They were 50 yards from

the rocks when the rim of the dazzling sun came over the ridge. A finger of heat stabbed through their clothing.

"Quick, the shade!" Turpin stumbled, fell and crawled into the lee of the rocks. Burns, sobbing for breath, collapsed beside him.

"Keep moving," Turpin shouted. "Don't stick your head out in that sun. It'll knock you."

On hands and knees they worked up through the rocks, keeping boulders and outcroppings between them and the murderous rays of the sun. At the top of the low ridge, they saw the rocket below them. They crawled to the bottom. Thirty feet of sunlight separated them from the ship.

"Got my legs again," Turpin gasped. "Run!"

They dashed across the blistering surface and tumbled into the open lock. Burns slammed it shut behind them.

"Get 'er off as fast as you can," the prospector directed. "The ship can take it, but we'll fry like eggs in here."

The rocket shot up, circled over the mountains and leveled down toward the prospector's refrigerated dome.

"Put it down close," Harry barked.

In their final dash to the dome, a huge boulder popped in the fantastic heat and sluffed off a section of its outer skin. The control on the air lock seared Harry's hands as he twisted the wheel. They dived inside, slamming the door behind them.

The two men gulped lungsful of the blessed, cool air and collapsed on the floor. Burns passed out. Harry watched him for a moment, and then found some ointment to smear on his hands.

He was essentially a peaceful man. After removing the claim jumper's gun, Turpin crawled into his bunk and slept.

Hours later he awoke with the earth heaving under him. Burns was shaking him violently, his eyes gleaming like a madman's.

"Wake up!" he yelled. "What the hell's happening now?"

"Simmer down," Harry yawned calmly. "Just an earthquake. Always does it. The rock skin on the whole planet heats up and expands. She shifts around like crazy, but it ain't busted up much of anything yet. One way it's a good sign. The dwarf will set in an hour or so."

A continuous, grinding roar vibrated and reverberated in the hollow metal shell. Burns cringed against the wall,

hands covering his ears. Keeping his balance on the queazy, shifting earth, Turpin walked to the center of the dome and pulled a periscope down from the ceiling. He looked slowly around the 360-degree horizon.

"She's really poppin'. Wanta look? Burns shook his head dumbly. After an hour-long eternity, the earthquake subsided and with it the hideous rumble of sound.

The claim jumper, crouched like a crazed animal, shambled toward Turpin, his face distorted with an insanity of hate.

"Thought you had me, didn't you," he said softly. "Took my gun. Thought you'd get me with some trick like poor Sammy. Now it's your turn, my friend."

He revealed a tiny black weapon he had hidden on his person.

Turpin eyed his enemy steadily for a moment. Then he turned calmly to a small, compact camp stove. He broke open a package of dehydrated protein. He added water from a jug and watched while the gray mass simmered into a lump of meat.

"Let's eat," he said quietly. "You'll feel better. This place get's your nerves, but it ain't bad after a while."

Burns jabbed the tiny black tube into Harry's back

"This can carve you to bits," he whispered ominously. "I can cut little holes in you, one at a time. And I know how to do it, so you'll stay alive just as long as I want. It'll cut so clean it won't bleed, but it doesn't kill pain at the nerve endings."

"Sure, you can do that," Harry said. His hand did not tremble as he adjusted the stove. "What for?"

"Gold!" Burns spat out. "Where is it?"

"Gold ain't worth killin' for," Turpin said. "I used to think it was, but it ain't. Believe me."

"Your life isn't worth a penny to me, old man," Burns said brutally. "You think I won't kill you. You're brave. You won't be brave when the pain starts hitting every nerve in your body."

Harry pulled the meat from the stove and ate slowly. He offered a portion to the claim-jumper. Burns struck the plastic dish viciously. It clattered against the wall and fell to the floor. Turpin shrugged his shoulders, finished eating and took a pull from a bottle of Scotch. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"You're makin' things aw-

ful tough for yourself," he said thinly.

Burns slashed down with his fist. Harry's head snapped back. He staggered and fell. A trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. He wiped it off and looked up; the eyes were blue steel again.

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"That hole. Following you out there killed Sammy. Why are you digging when there's nothing but fool's gold."

Turpin sat up.

"The beetles," he explained, "they eat metals. Iron oxide mostly. They eat the iron and spit out the oxygen. That's where this rock gets its atmosphere. But mostly they like iron pyrites, fool's gold. That's about all I've ever found, so I dig it for 'em. We're sorta symbiotic, them and me."

Burns grunted. He rubbed the little black tube, slowly, between his fingers.

"Then where's the gold?"

Turpin stared at him for a long moment.

"I'll show you, when it coals down."

Burns kept an eye on the prospector while he stared into the periscope.

"The dwarf's down," he said, "It's almost dark out there."

"There'll be enough light to see," Harry said. "The Cepheid will be up again in a few minutes." He opened the airlock. Burns followed him warily, the tiny weapon poised for instant use.

In the dim half light, Turpin walked to the base of the cliff and tugged at a large boulder. It rolled away to reveal a small tunnel in the rock. Burns fell to his knees, peered inside.

"You better look behind you," Harry said softly.

Burns leaped to his feet, jabbed the tube in Turpin's ribs.

"That's the oldest gag in the universe," he snarled. "What you tryin' to pull?"

A high, thin grinding sound pierced their ears, like a hundred diamond saws ripping titanium steel. Burns whirled in the direction of his ship.

It was covered with beetles.

"They'll chew through that hull in about ten minutes," Harry said. Burns spun back, raised the tube to fire.

"I wouldn't," Harry barked, "if you want to get off this planet alive."

Burns screamed and kicked his foot.

Thousands of the orange and black bugs surrounded him. A half dozen were chewing his boot.

The claim jumper went berserk. He pointed the weapon at the ground. A thin beam of purple light leaped out of the muzzle, sweeping the ground. Where it traveled, the beetles disappeared, but thousands more, wave upon wave, pressed into the vacancies.

"Call 'em off," he screamed. "Call 'em off, for God's sake!"

Harry didn't speak or move. He just stood there. But the beetles backed away, forming a tiny circle around the claim jumper. The terrible piercing ceased, leaving a deep, throbbing silence.

"They can think," Harry explained, "real good, and they know what I'm thinking. They like me, so they do what I think 'em to do."

"All right," Burns panted. "I'm going. Just let me get away from this hell planet and I'll never bother you again. I'll see that no one ever bothers you again."

"That's better," Harry said. He concentrated on the mental message.

The wave of beetles separated and opened a path to Burns' rocket. He backed haltingly, then turned and ran as though all the devils of hell were at his heels.

As he slammed shut the hatch the swarm of insects peeled off the hull of the ship —except from around the rims of the rocket ports.

"Gosh," Harry mused, "I forgot to tell him the little cusses get a real jag on when they smell titanium. Them tubes are probably shot."

He watched the rocket soar into the stratosphere and turn silver in the light of the rising Cepheid sun. He thought the speeding ship faltered once in flight, but he wasn't sure.

Harry hummed a tune.

He crawled into the tunnel under the cliff and flashed a light up the narrow natural flue in the rock. Far up he could see where the narrow rivulet of gold, under the heat of the white dwarf, had melted and oozed a few feet lower.

Like a miniature army, the beetles streamed down the flue and moved past him in single file.

He flashed the light into his gold pan.

It was filling slowly with tiny fragments of bright, yellow riches as the bugs deposited their burden.

THE END

DEATH
Has Strong Hands

By LAWRENCE CHANDLER

For big-game hunters there was no place like Venus. It had animals that even a nightmare couldn't improve on. Made to order for a man who could look danger in the face and laugh—or a woman who could hate a man enough to kill him!

SALLY FORREST and I were glaring at each other while the Big Man talked away the final moments before blastoff. Sally Forrest and I didn't like each other, but we liked the Big Man even less.

"You're Africa, Halden," he told me in his booming voice. "Lions and gorillas and rhino."

"Yes, sir, T. F.," I said.

T. F. turned to Sally. "And you're Southeast Asia. Tigers and panthers and hamadryads."

"I *was* Southeast Asia," Sally Forrest corrected him,

The crackling rays congealed about him, holding him helpless.

as only a woman could. "I'm Venus now. So's Dick."

"Venus," said T. F., making an expansive gesture with his glowing cigar, as if with his pudgy dimpled fist and the expensive rolled Havana he could take in all the empty space from here to Pluto and back. "Venus, to begin with. After that, Mars, the asteroids —who knows? We need circus animals, Halden. We need 'em, Sally. With all this Buck Rogers talk since the first space flight twenty years ago, people don't think much of lions or tigers or hamadryads."

"That's because they've never chased one," Sally said.

"Anyhow. You two are the most famous bring-'em-back-alive experts since Frank Buck. After this trip to Venus, one of you is going to be the Frank Buck of space. For the other, it's back to Earth and lions and tigers. You don't like each other, do you?"

"Not particularly," Sally admitted.

"That's fine. That's wonderful. I want good clean competition, see? Whoever brings back more Venus creatures gets the contract."

"Do we have to go on the same spaceship, T. F.?" Sally Forrest wanted to know.

"I won't throw my money away on two separate expeditions. We've got to be economy-minded until we know for sure what you'll find on Venus."

I looked up at the wall-chrono. "Blastoff minus five," I told T. F. In space flight, you don't hold the gangplank for VIP's, not even for the boss. If you do, the whole orbit will have to be re-computed.

T. F. stood up and shook hands with Sally, then with me. "Halden, Forrest," he boomed, "I'm depending on you. For one of you two lucky kids, this flight will mean fame and fortune. For the Great T. F. Inter-Continental Circus, it means new vistas."

"What about the crew?" I said.

"Already aboard, Halden. Not exactly hand-picked, see? But you can't expect any better when all the best spacemen are signing up for the government flights to Saturn and Uranus. You'll manage."

Well, that was T. F. A multi-millionaire but as economy-minded as a pensioned octogenarian trying to stretch his government check in St. Petersburg, Florida. With a rock-bottom crew and a battered old tub of a spaceship which had been making the quartz run to Luna, Sally

Forrest and I were supposed to bring big-game tactics to Venus, which had been visited only once before, and then by the government exploration ship which had remained on the second planet only long enough to plant the stars and stripes in whatever passed for Venusian soil. The Venusian environment was still top-secret, because if we kept it so the Russians couldn't claim they'd been there first.

We saw T. F. down the gangplank. He waved cheerily, leaving a cloud of thick tobacco smoke in his wake like an octopus leaves ink. For the first time ever, I was glad to be alone with Sally Forrest. Not that I don't like dames. But there can't be two Frank Bucks around at one time, and so far it had been a draw between Sally and me. Maybe on Venus, I thought, it would be different.

"Sixty seconds to blastoff!" a mechanical voice blared from the squawk box. Sally and I hammocked in and then got ourselves squashed, kicked in the stomach, hammered in the ribs, beaten around the head, twisted, contorted, disjointed and generally manhandled by a few score extra pounds of pressure per square inch of our body surfaces. It's known as blastoff and brother, you can have it.

"Feel better?" I asked Sally Forrest three days later. She still hadn't gotten over the effect of weightlessness. Try to think of being seasick and plagued with the worst hangover since they outlawed bathtub brew, both at the same time, and you'll come close.

"A little. Buck up, Dick. Maybe I'll get a relapse. Feeling like this, I won't make much of a hunter."

"I didn't mean anything like that."

"Well, one of us is going to be a hero up there on Venus. You're for number one, aren't you?"

"I'm for getting to Venus and back alive. Both of us."

"And after that?"

"Yeah. After that I guess I'm for number one."

Just then there was a commotion outside the passenger lounge of the Spaceship *Ringling*. I gave Sally a what's-up look and we both must have realized at the same time that we hadn't met any of our crew yet. Of T. F.'s economy crew.

Feet pounded down the metal companionway outside. A voice said, "Open door, please?"

I walked to the door and

opened it. Since T. F. had once stuck me in Kenya with a safari of Swahili-speaking natives, not a one of them knowing English, I didn't know what to expect. A small figure of a man came hurtling by and entered the lounge. A larger figure, brandishing a length of metal pipe the size of a baseball bat, stood in the doorway.

"What's going on here?" I said. The man in the doorway wore metal-shod boots. It was a good idea, because that way you wouldn't have to swim around in weightless air. "I'm going to flatten that sneaky dog," the man in the doorway said.

I gripped a stanchion to prevent myself from floating off toward the ceiling. "Not on this ship," I said.

"Well, he's always sneaking around and looking for something."

"Cool off," I said. "Who are you?"

"Cullcross," the man told me. "Astrogator." I studied him. You could find a man like Cullcross in Mozambique or on the Upper Congo and maybe in the Canadian northwoods a dozen years ago. His kind and civilization didn't get along, though. He was a big hard man and the way the skin on his face sagged, the way the skin of his nose was big-pored and red-veined, you could tell years of hard drinking was either one of the reasons or one of the consequences.

"Kono is not sneaky," a calm voice said. I turned around. A small olive-skinned man stood near Sally. He couldn't have been more than five feet tall and an even hundred pounds stripped. "This is Kono's first space fright," he went on. "Kono is just interested in space fright, that's all." Space fright. At first I didn't get it. But the Japanese do not have the equivalent of the letter "L" in their phonetic alphabet. While the Chinese are "velly solly," the Japanese, when impressed with something, are liable to call it a "raraparooza." So, it was space fright.

"I'll break your skinny neck, Yakanowa," Cullcross promised.

"What's your job around here?" I asked Kono Yakanowa.

"I am chief assistant generar herper in charge of everything."

"Just keep out of my hair," said Cullcross.

I figured this was as good a time as any to meet the rest of our blue-ribbon crew.

"Where are the others?" I asked Cullcross.

He gave me a harsh, humorless laugh. "Me and Yakanowa are it," he said. "I could do a better job alone."

I nodded. "That's enough of that, Cullcross. If it's just the two of you, O. K. But you're going to work together, understand?"

Again Cullcross laughed. "Like you and Miss Forrest?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I read the papers. A couple of regular love birds, hunh?"

Sally floated weightlessly across the lounge to Cullcross and slapped his face. "Whether Mr. Halden and I like each other or not is none of your business," she said quietly.

Delivered weightlessly, the blow didn't have much force behind it, but it stung Cullcross inside. You could see it in his eyes, in the unblinking way he stared at Sally until she finally looked away. "No offense, ma'am," he finally grumbled. Then he let his gaze move slowly down Sally's body. There was nothing furtive about it. He wanted her to know, and in that one glance he could show her that we were far out in space, further from civilization than Southeast Asia or any place else Sally had ever been, and that while there were laws which said you could do certain things and could not do certain other things, this far out in the depths of space the laws and the men who made them hardly mattered and that's why Cullcross had come out here and why his kind would always move out, a big running step ahead of civilization, to the new frontier.

Sally flushed, the redness flooding up from her neck across her face. "That's all, Cullcross," she said. "You can go."

He could, but he wouldn't go very far in this tin can of a spaceship. And he'd be on Venus with us. With Sally and me battling tooth and nail for everything from the Venusian equivalent of a hamadryad or an elephant on down, and with Cullcross and Kono Yakanowa serving as men Friday and hating each other and Cullcross maybe trying to translate into action the look he gave Sally after enough time had passed, this was going to be one hell of a hunting expedition.

"Venus," said Cullcross two weeks later.

After the steady thrum of the spaceship's reaction motors, the silence was almost frightening. "We're the sec-

ond ship down here, ever," Sally said, a little awed by her own words.

There were no ports in the battered hull of the *Ringling*. For eyes in space we had radar and while the lead-lined hull could protect you from cosmic radiation, glass and even quartzite could not. So here we sat with the unknown immensity of Venus waiting outside, with only six inches of lead and steel separating us from it.

"I checked the zero degrees storage units," I told Sally.

"In order?"

"All the way," I said, and wondered what would fill our deep freeze for the return trip to Earth.

"How about the zero guns?" Sally asked me.

"Ditto."

"How many did T. F. give us?"

"Exactly two," I said, smiling. "More of T. F.'s economy measures."

"You can have those zero toys," said Cullcross. "I'll take my blaster."

"The general idea," Sally pointed out, "is for us to bring the animals back alive."

"Will we need vac-suits?" I asked Sally, who had been in charge of checking the Venusian environment while I gave our equipment the once over.

"Uh-uh," Sally shook her head. "There's a lot of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but a lot of oxygen, too. Gravity's almost Earth normal since Venus is just a few hundred miles smaller than Earth."

"What about temperature?" I asked. Venus is only sixty-odd million miles from the sun.

"A hundred and thirty-five," Sally said, smiling grimly. "I'll bet you thought Africa was hot."

"As long as there's water," said Cullcross practically. Then he added: "Hey, where the hell is Yakanowa?"

I looked at Sally, but she only shrugged. "Kono?" I called. "Hey, Kono!"

There was no answer, but pretty soon we heard a thudding sound from the direction of the airlock. I sprinted out into the companionway and reached the airlock a running step ahead of Sally and Cullcross. I swung the big door open and saw Kono standing there, bathed in sweat.

"There prenty good air outside." He beamed at me in high humor.

"That sneaky s.o.b. had to be first man out," Cullcross growled.

"Kono onry interested. First Japanese in space fright."

"What's it like out there?" Sally asked Kono eagerly.

Before the little Japanese had a chance to answer, the *Ringling* began to rock furiously, as if a giant stood outside there trying to shake us out of it. Kono began to say something, but the words were lost in a violent, booming explosive sound.

"Suppose we find out?" I shouted, buckling on one of the zero guns.

Picture a world where the sun, bigger and brighter than the sun on Earth, never quite shines through the perpetual cloud blanket but makes it a dazzling, glaring, eye-hurting white. Picture ferns the size of redwood trees and a tangled mass of creepers and lianas which make Brazil's Matto Grosso jungle look like a desert. Then picture a valley with the old hull of the *Ringling* resting in it, the blast of our planetfall rockets scorching the giant ferns to cinder for a hundred yards around. And finally picture a bleak lofty ring of gray mountains biting into the clouds like six-mile-high teeth, surrounding the valley on all sides. And that's Venus as we saw it.

But you can't really visualize it unless you've been there —because of the heat. If you ever left a car out in the sun on a hot summer day with all the windows closed and then felt what it was like before you opened the windows, you'd get the idea. It was not just heat you felt, but heat which sapped the strength from you in minutes and tugged the sweat from every pore in your body and kept it there, slick as oil, on your skin because the humid air was already super-saturated.

"There's your explosion," Sally said, pointing.

One of the valley-ringing mountains had blown its head off. A geyser of lava was still spouting and already the hot ash was drifting down across the valley, blackening the sweat on our bodies.

"Think it's safe?" Sally asked over the hissing sound of the lava geyser.

I nodded. The geyser shot straight up in the windless air and cascaded down upon the volcano, rebuilding the shattered cone. We might be showered with ash, but that would be the worst of it.

"Kono scared," the Japanese said suddenly in a small voice.

"You're some spaceman, Yakanowa," Cullcross taunted him, but his voice lacked conviction.

"I feel kind of uneasy myself," Sally admitted.

And I could feel it, too. Fear? Something like fear. But not in me. Outside, somehow, as if along with the shock waves and the ash from the erupting mountain, the Venusian atmosphere carried an almost palpable aura of fear. I could feel the hackles on the back of my neck try to rise as the vestigal nerves there responded to the vague terror in the only way they knew.

"This is crazy, the way I feel," Sally said. "Like—like someone or something is wailing in terror, screaming and screaming but you can't quite hear it because the voice is on a different register."

Once in Africa I had been among the Swahili during a total eclipse of the sun and it was something like this. The natives chanted and tried their impotent magic, but the black disc of the moon still crept inexorably over the bright face of the sun, hiding it until a mid-day darkness fell over the jungle. And the natives, with their bright sports shirts and Western-style trousers gave way to primitive fear and it was on every face if you were close enough to see and in all the wailing voices and while I wasn't afraid myself, something of the Swahili fear was contagious and I felt myself wondering fantastically with them if the sun would ever shine on their jungle and their stockade again.

Primitive, undirected telepathy?

"Something's coming," Sally said.

Now I heard it too, a pounding of many feet across the wet spongy Venusian ground. I loosened the zero gun at my belt but felt only mildly reassured with it in my hand. "Get back in the *Ringling!*" I cried loudly.

Looking around the charred valley, we had wandered several score yards from the *Ringling*. We sprinted back toward it now, Kono in the lead with Cullcross right behind him.

We were too late.

There was a wild trumpeting sound and something with two heads and twice the number of feet an animal usually has went hurtling by. It was big as an elephant and fast as a cheetah and it streaked by between us and the *Ringling* and kept going. For a moment I thought the way was clear, but a dozen more of the creatures came thundering down on us, their huge padded feet beating the soggy earth like

a symphony of discordant drums.

Others followed them. Big and small, furry and leathery, roaring and trumpeting and whistling and howling, bright and colorful or drab in protective mimicry—the fauna of Venus, exactly what we had come across thirty million miles of space looking for.

And it looked like they might trample us to death before we had a chance to use our zero guns.

"We can't reach the ship!" Cullcross hollered.

I shrugged. If something still bigger was coming, even the ship might not be safe. "The hell with the ship," I said. "Let's get out of this valley."

We ran in the steaming, swamp-reeking heat. Lianas and creepers held and caught and once a big one wrapped itself around Sally's neck and she screamed and fell. I hacked the creeper clear with my knife and got her to her feet and we were running again.

The fear pursued us. It was there in the frantic, fleeing animals and there in the air somehow, and in all of us too. It was vague and formless and that made it worse. For some reason, it hit big Cullcross the strongest, maybe because he fought it so hard all along. Without any warning, he stopped in his tracks and let out a howl which had been there in his ancestral memory and which his first ancestor and yours might have used when he ran, fleeing demons, to his cave.

I felt it too, my heart pounding, my breath short, my nerves frayed. Fear. Basic animal fear with no apparent reason for it. I slammed my open hand against Cullcross' face and then grabbed the front of his shirt and shook him. "We all feel it," I told him savagely. "But we've got to reach the hills or we're through. Maybe you've never been caught in a stampede, Cullcross. I have."

Whimpering, he followed me. A couple of hundred yards ahead and all but concealed by the creepers and undergrowth, Kono and Sally were running. We seemed to have stumbled on a natural game trail—which was fine unless the stampede decided to use it.

Slowly at first, the ground began to rise. Then steeper, until we were climbing a thirty-degree slope. A babble of animal sounds was all around us, but except for occasional glimpses of gray or of mottled brown, the undergrowth obscured the fleeing creatures of Venus.

Now the ground was rocky, the vegetation more sparse. We had hit the foothills of the mountains and could not see the geyser of lava now but could hear it bubbling, hissing and rumbling.

"Hold it," Sally said. We rounded a sharp turn in the game trail, Cullcross and I, and came upon Sally and Kono standing there. "Kono stumbled on a cave," she said. "I think it would be better than running until we fall."

Big, gray and featureless, a smooth escarpment reared up on our left. At its very foot gaped the dark entrance of a cave. Still whimpering, Cullcross was the first to plunge inside. Kono and Sally followed him and I hunkered down outside, holding the heavy zero gun across my legs.

The formless fear pulsed and eddied and challenged me to the brink of hysteria.

Be rational, Halden, I told myself. On Earth there's wind and snow and rain. On Venus there's fear. It's raining fear, that's all. Recognize it and you can fight it. I blinked stinging sweat from my eyes. I could feel pimply heat rash rising all over my body under my drenched, sticky clothing.

I began to peel the clothing off. To hell with Sally Forrest, I thought, perversely amused. I stripped down to exactly nothing and sat there listening to animal sounds.

Night on Venus. A bright crimson glow from the volcano, lurid, like the pulsing glow of a city's neon seen from the suburbs. The dank jungle smells drifting up from the valley below us, and almost no sound. Wherever the animals had fled to, whatever they had fled from, it was over—at least temporarily.

"That was good of you, Dick."

"Sally? Hi." In the red darkness, I could barely see her. I'd climbed back into my trousers a few minutes ago and felt presentable, except that I could have stood a shower and some good food and drink and maybe a rubdown, come to think of it.

"I mean, standing guard like that while the rest of us slept."

"Still scared?" I asked.

"Some. Not as much as before."

"It seems to be going away."

"Think it will come back, Dick?"

I shrugged, realized she couldn't see the gesture in the darkness and said, "I don't know."

"What is it?"

"A kind of fear radiation in the air?" I guessed.

"Fear radiation?"

"Telling the animals they have to flee from the volcano, I mean."

"Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"They weren't fleeing from the volcano. They were heading straight for it."

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

"Well, they were."

"Think we ought to go back to the *Ringling* in the morning and call it quits?"

"Do you?"

"I asked you, Sally."

"Are you afraid?"

"You're damned right I'm afraid. From the outside in, though. You felt it too."

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm here on Venus to find T. F. some new circus creatures."

"I was thinking of Kono and—"

"Of course, if you want to go back and the others agree with you, it wouldn't be fair for me to stop you."

"Not me," I said. "But we ought to take a look at the ship in the morning."

"We'll have to go down there for a tractor, anyway."

"Provided we get anything to haul back."

"Really, Dick. I don't want to be the one who says we stay."

"Lady," I said, "I'm a hunter too, remember?"

"Africa must seem pretty tame compared to this."

"And Southeast Asia," I added for her.

"I'll stay up a while, Dick. Get some sleep."

"Thank you," I said. It was the closest to real companionship we'd ever got, but you could feel the tension, as if on the slightest provocation we'd fly at each other.

I went inside the cave and it was so dark I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. I heard Kono's even breathing, Cullcross' steady snoring. I lay down and tried to relax. At first I was one big bundle of nervous energy, but then Cullcross' snoring stopped and I must have been fidgeting around noisily because Cullcross grumbled: "Take some of this if you can't sleep."

I felt a flask pushed into my hand and uncapped it, taking a deep swallow of Cullcross' good Irish whiskey. Then I returned the flask to Cullcross and leaned back down again. Except for Kono's regular breathing and the first signs of Cullcross' renewed snoring, there was no sound except the steady hissing of the lava. It

lulled me and I drifted off to sleep and my last thought was I sure could use some sleep.

And then, outside the cave, Sally screamed.

I ran out there and saw her silhouetted against the red volcano glow, peering intently into the darkness.

"What is it?" I said, notching my zero gun to full intensity.

"I'm sorry I screamed, Dick. It startled me so."

"What happened?"

"Something came running by, that's all."

"And it's gone now?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"What's going on out here?" Cullcross demanded in the darkness.

Sally told him what she had told me. I couldn't see Cullcross' face, but I was willing to bet his expression said that a woman, explorer and big-game hunter or no, would scream at the drop of a hat. He said, "That Yakanowa could sleep through an atom bombing."

"Where *is* Kono?" Sally said.

I jerked a thumb back toward the cave, then realized they couldn't see it. "Inside," I said, and headed for the deeper darkness of the cave on the double.

"Up and at 'em, Kono!" Cullcross shouted.

I told him to shut up. There was no sense waking Kono if he was still asleep. We had a big day ahead of us tomorrow and Kono could use all the rest he could get. I paced off the cave, which was roughly ten paces square. I criss-crossed it several times.

No Kono.

"Find him?" Sally asked.

"No. Kono's gone."

"But where? Why?"

Instead of answering her questions, I asked one of my own. "Do you still feel it?"

"Feel what? The fear, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"It's not as strong as before, but I feel it."

"So did Kono," I pointed out. "What did it make the animals do?"

"Why, it made them run—as if they were fleeing from something."

"So, it figures Kono started running too."

"That Yakanowa," said Cullcross. "I knew he'd pull something like this."

"You can't talk, Cullcross," I said. "You damn near went off your rocker before."

"Shut up about that," Cullcross growled. "Not in front of her."

"For crying out loud!" Sally

shouted. "We all felt it, Cullcross. If we get it out in the open, maybe we can figure out what it is."

We did some more talking and got exactly nowhere. We decided against sleep, though. One disappearance a night was enough. "When it gets light," I said, "we'll start looking for Kono."

"Maybe," Cullcross told me.

With dawn, the fear returned.

It seemed to reinforce itself, for it was stronger now. I looked at Sally and didn't have to ask to know she felt it too. Cullcross, even more surly than he had been yesterday, averted our eyes.

"Listen," Sally said.

The animals were running again. You could hear the noise of their flight, but they seemed to avoid the game trail and plunge recklessly through the fern forest.

"All right," I said. "Then that's it. We follow them all the way."

Cullcross looked at me for the first time this morning. "Are you crazy?"

"Kono," I reminded him. "Kono ran, the same as the animals are running. We've got to find him."

"You're nuts, Halden. I ain't going anyplace like that."

"Please, Cullcross," Sally said. "There's a man's life at stake."

"So, go ahead."

Sally shook her head. "I don't think we ought to separate."

Cullcross shrugged. "Well, I'm not." The sultry Venusian heat, which had been dispelled by the night, was returning in hot, energy-sapping waves. But Cullcross shivered as if he were freezing cold.

"We can play it any way you want," I told him. "You are coming with us, Cullcross. That's an order."

He looked at me. Here in the early days of space flight, punishment for insubordination had to be severe. If Columbus' mutineers had had their way, America might have belonged to the Indians for another generation. It was the same way in space, with broad new vistas opening for mankind if he but had the energy—and the guts—to face them. If Cullcross disobeyed me now, he would be drummed out of space for the rest of his life, and very possibly serve a prison sentence. *If* I lived to tell of it.

"O. K.," he finally said. "You're running things."

He had given in too easily, I thought. When his chance came and if he still disagreed with me, Cullcross would try to assert himself. And the only way he could do that safely was to see that Sally and I never got off Venus alive.

"Stick to the game trail," I warned Sally as we began to walk. "The Venusian animals seem to prefer the forest."

"Did you ever stop to think about it?" Sally asked as we began walking. "Are they running from something—or *towards* something?"

"I don't get you."

"Well, take Kono. If something had frightened him, he wouldn't have just run off like that."

"Unless it were an irrational fear," I suggested.

"Well, that's unlikely. He had you and me and Cullcross to help him. But off he went. Dick, what if it's an irrational compulsion not to flee, but to *do* something?"

"Like what?"

"Like—well—did you ever hear of the Lemmings?"

"Lemmings?" I said.

"Little rodents living in Europe on Earth. Every once in a while, for no apparent reason, they all start migrating."

"So do birds," I said. "But there's usually a reason, like change in weather."

"Well, there's no reason science can find for the Lemmings. And anyway, birds just fly to warmer climates in the fall and cooler climates in the spring."

I shrugged. "What do these Lemmings do?"

"Millions of them get together on a mass migration and head for the sea to commit suicide."

"The sea?" I said.

"Don't you see what I'm getting at, Dick? They can't swim. It's a suicide migration. It's nature's way of getting rid of the excess Lemming population. They breed as fast as rabbits, so there has to be some way of checking them, because they have fewer natural enemies than rabbits have."

"Are you trying to say the same kind of thing is happening here on Venus?"

"It's a guess, Dick, but I think so. It makes sense. Did you ever see a place teeming with life like this before? Not even Africa or Southeast Asia. A suicide migration, Dick. Nature's checkrein. Dick, I'm afraid."

"Take it easy. You mean, you think there's a phony fear somehow driving the Venusian animals to the slaughter?

A kind of invisible Judas Ram?"

"That's right."

"But what kind of slaughter—"

For answer, Sally pointed. We'd been moving steadily along the game-trail, and, I now realized, climbing higher into the mountains. We were walking three abreast, Sally, Cullcross and I. And as we followed the sounds of the fleeing animals, every step took us closer to the volcano.

We'd come perhaps half a mile. At the moment, the volcano was not active, but heavy black smoke was pouring from its cone. And we didn't seem to be more than two or three miles from the cone itself now. And Kono?

"I heard what you said," Cullcross told us abruptly. "You can go ahead up there and commit suicide if you want, but not this boy."

"We're sticking together, Cullcross."

He muttered something which Sally Forrest should not have heard. He pulled his blaster while I was still fumbling with my heavier zero gun. "I'm going back to the ship," he said in a level voice.

"You know that's insubordination."

"Not if they don't find out about it back on Earth," he told me, and leveled his blaster.

He stood three paces to my left, with Sally between us. He was working up his courage, I thought. Under the circumstances and with Cullcross being what he was, it wouldn't take long.

I did the only thing I could do. I hurled myself not at Cullcross but at Sally, who stood between us. Cullcross' blaster roared, searing air inches above my head. Sally gave a surprise yelp and then we were a mass of writhing arms and legs as my momentum threw Sally against Cullcross and the three of us went down together.

Cullcross got to his feet first—and used them. I'd climbed to hands and knees and came up after him while Sally scrambled for the blaster he'd dropped. He caught me on the side of the head with his left foot and I tumbled over on my back. I lay there trying to suck in more air than the Venusian atmosphere would give me at one breath while Sally got the blaster and pointed it at Cullcross and said, "That's enough."

But Cullcross was crazed now, with the Venus fear and whatever had been burning

and seething in him all his life. He roared and dove at Sally, ignoring the blaster. I heard a click, a very unladylike curse from Sally, and saw her hurl the jammed weapon at Cullcross. It struck his shoulder and made him yell, and then he was on her.

I shook myself and stood up, leaning over them. I yanked at Cullcross' shoulders as he bore Sally to the ground. I spun him around and clipped the side of his jaw with my right fist. He roared again and let Sally fall back, dazed, and came for me. I met him halfway and sent him sprawling with a right chop under the heart and a left hook which split the skin on his face from temple to jawbone. I went down after him and got his boots in my stomach as he kicked up and sent me tumbling over his head.

Dimly I was aware of Sally holding her heavy zero gun and trying to get into a position from which she could use it on Cullcross, not on me.

Cullcross and I got up at the same time. We came for each other and didn't waste any effort feinting or jockeying for position in the fierce heat. We stood toe to toe and slugged and my knuckles were sustaining more damage bouncing off Cullcross' hard muscular body than was my face and chest from Cullcross' blows. We couldn't keep it up too long, not in a hundred-and-thirty degree heat. I knew it and Cullcross knew it and we were both looking to land the one knockout punch which would end the fight quick.

And then, without any warning, Cullcross began to run.

Sally lined up the sights of her zero gun, but I brushed the barrel aside. "Cut it out!" I panted. "Don't you feel it too?"

"I—yes. I want to run. I want to follow Cullcross. Dick, does that mean—?"

"Yeah. Whatever gets these animals and got Kono last night came across to Cullcross finally. And almost has us. See? Cullcross isn't heading back for the ship. He's heading for the volcano."

To hurl himself in on some strange Venusian suicide impulse? It seemed likely. First there was the fear, so that you had to run from something without knowing what it was or why. And then came the suicide impulse.

"We can't follow him, Dick. We've got to stop before it's too late."

"Are you just going to leave Kono up there?" I said savagely.

"Kono's dead. He must be dead."

"Could you tell them that back on Earth?" I asked Sally. "And live with yourself afterwards? Could you tell that to Kono's family without knowing for sure? Could you leave him here on Venus without ever finding out what really happened to him?"

Sally did the last thing I expected. She smiled at me. "It's funny," she said. "I never knew you, Dick. I never really knew you. You were just a hunter. T. F.'s other hunter. You never had a heart, I thought. You were just the other guy. I hated you without knowing you. I—Dick, listen. Whatever happens now, I don't hate you. Of course we have to go after Kono. And Cullcross, too. He's a human being and I guess that's reason enough. Come on."

"Just a minute," I said. I walked over to Sally and took her in my arms and all at once it was the most natural thing in the world because we had been hating each other so long without really knowing each other and now that the knowledge came something strong and right and wonderful replaced the hate.

I kissed Sally quickly because I knew if we lingered like that we might change our minds about going after Kono. "I love you," I said, and the words were stiff and sounded strange in my ears. Someday soon—if we got off Venus—I'd want to keep on telling Sally that and she'd want to keep on listening, but now there was only the newness of it, the strangeness.

"Let's get going," I said.

We followed the roaring, trumpeting, squawking, running, crawling, slithering Venusian animals toward their volcano of death.

Half an hour later, we were detouring around the first lava flow. It crept down the mountainside slowly, a sluggish gray blanket, steaming and charnel-smelling because hundreds of the Venusian animals had hurled themselves into it. You could see some of them still in the lava, trapped there, writhing and burning like torches. By the time the slow flow reached the bottom of the mountain, they would be nothing but bone and ash.

The closer we got to the cone of the volcano, the more we wanted to hurry. It was the fear - impulse now — stronger than before.

"Tell me you love me again," Sally said.

I looked at her and did some mental head-scratching, and then got the idea. You could replace one emotion with another. If you couldn't shackle the fear, you could smother it. I told Sally what she wanted to hear—and felt the fear retreat. I kept it up all the way up the mountainside.

At the very top, we found Cullcross. He had avoided the lava flows and he stood right at the lip of the volcano's crater where an overhang of hard granitic rock had not been fused by the heat. He stood on the rock and looked down at us and shook his fist.

"Keep away from me!" he roared. "I'm not going back."

"If the volcano kicks up again you'll be roasted," I told him.

"Just keep away from me. I know what I'm doing. I don't want to go back. You won't make me. I don't want to stay here. I don't . . . don't . . ." He was babbling now. The fear had got him. With Sally and me it was different. We had something else, stronger than the fear. Cullcross had nothing.

"I've got to get him down from there," I told Sally. And I began to climb the final few yards to where Cullcross was standing. He stopped, straightened — hurled something at me. He was peppering rocks toward me like flak, but his aim was bad.

"Come down from there," I said to Cullcross, as you might say it to a small child who has climbed up on the mantel over the fireplace or slid down the bannister of a flight of stairs and sat poised on the newel post.

Cullcross went on shaking his fist and throwing things. I'd forgotten all about the zero gun I was carrying until Sally yelled after me: "Why don't you freeze him, Dick?"

Cullcross heard her too. He screamed once and tried to hurl himself into the crater. He hung for a moment on the edge and I fired the zero gun at him point-blank.

A solid block of frozen air, with Cullcross safely inside, tumbled end over end down the mountainside. It wasn't quite suspended animation, but it would do until the real thing came along. Cullcross would be safe until we could thaw him out back on Earth and have a psychiatrist look at him.

I rejoined Sally and watched the animals streaming up the mountainside to their death. We remembered for the first time in hours what we had come to Venus for, and

without the need for words both of us began aiming our zero guns and using them. A score of other airblocks joined Cullcross' temporary crypt at the bottom of the mountain. The sizzling sound of the zero guns still rang in my ears, but now I could hear something else, too.

Kono.

His voice was faint, almost apologetic. "Young Japanese generar herper stuck way down here," he said.

I clawed my way back to the lip of the volcano and peered over. The smoke was acrid and sulphurous but the level of the molten rock had receded, temporarily at least. A ledge ran around the inside of the crater, half a dozen feet down. Kono was sitting on this ledge, with barely enough room to keep from falling.

"Kono had idea to jump in crater," he said. "But Kono changed mind on the way down, thank you."

He was stuck. He couldn't get out without help. If we returned to the *Ringling* for a rope, anything might happen to Kono in the meanwhile. "Just hold tight," I called to him. "I'll get you."

Sally joined me at the volcano's rim. I told her what we had to do and then, before she could protest, jackknifed myself over the edge, my legs dangling outside, my body and arms inside the volcano. I thought I could handle myself, but the danger was mostly unpredictable—and unavoidable. If any of the Venusian animals decided they wanted to use this particular part of the rim of the mile-wide crater for their jumping-off point, I was finished.

The ledge Kono sat on couldn't have been more than eighteen inches across. And beyond it, the walls of the crater's inside dropped, sheer and featureless, to unthinkable depths.

I began to worm my way down and felt Sally's hand close on my ankles. She'd have decent leverage, I knew, until I had to straighten out of my jackknife and lower my body toward Kono. Then she'd have to use her muscles, and if she wasn't up to it, down would go Dick Halden and the T. F. circus people back home would start dreaming up a suitable epitaph.

Sweat drenched me, dripped off me, burned my eyes. I tried to blink them clear. My voice sounded disembodied as I said, "Kono, reach up and grab my arms. I'll haul you up."

"Kono forgot to terr you his reg is broken."

I groaned and hoped Sally could hold on and lowered myself further. All at once, the suicide impulse hit me. We'd figured it out pretty good, I thought—but we'd never had time to think where the impulse originated from. I had my answer—or, the answer almost had me.

It came from the volcano.

Venus was a young world, a mountain-building world, a world of too much life. The mountains were blowing their heads off all the time and they summoned the over - abundance of animal life to a fiery death.

And tried to coax a big-game hunter name of Dick Halden, too.

I didn't want to die. Life was a fine thing. I loved life. Yet I was trying to kick my feet loose of Sally's grasp and there could be only one result if I did.

The crater yawned below me—horrible, inviting. Fires glowed deep inside, sullen now, brooding. Waiting.

"Kono sripping," Kono called up to me. His voice was loud now. I was close, but couldn't see again as a cloud of foul-smelling smoke drifted up and blinded me. "It is strange," Kono said, "how Kono wanted to die but changed his mind when thoughts of the wonders of space fright to other pranets came to him and he knew he had to rive and is cringing here. Now Kono sripping."

"I'll get you," I said. I thought of Sally and the way it was in Africa with the flat-topped acacia trees shading a sky bigger than the sky you see any place else and the good warm air of the veldt and the songs the natives there sing, the Swahili chants, and how now big game hunting was moving to the planets and how wonderful it would be with Sally at my side. And still the impulse to hurl myself down there persisted.

"Help!" Kono screamed. It was the first and last time I ever heard him pronounce the letter "l" properly.

And then I felt his hands tugging at my arms from below.

We linked arms and I started wriggling back out of the crater and yelled, "Start yanking, Sally!" and did some praying, too.

Then I was standing on the overhang of granitic rock and Kono was there with me hobbling around on his one good leg and talking about Nipponese demons. I stayed there with Kono and the block of frozen air which housed Cull-

ross who had wanted to die because unlike Kono and Sally and me he had nothing to live for, and the twenty other blocks of frozen air which held our specimens while Sally went back to the *Ringling*.

Hours later, we were hauling the blocks of frozen air back to the ship, with Kono perched jauntily atop the tractor.

I looked at Sally. It was all right with me and I could tell it was all right with her, too.

"The only thing that bothers me," Sally said as we reached the safety of the ship and stored our specimens—and Cullcross—in the deep freeze, "is what T. F. said before we started. One of us will be famous as a big-game hunter in space. One of us."

I grinned at her. "T. F. is wrong, unless he wants to give both of us the can. He never thought about us getting married, did he?"

"I never thought about us getting married either."

"No?"

"No. But a gal can change her mind, can't she?" **THE END**

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(My commission expires March 30, 1956.)

From the depths of desert sands rose a fabled beast of antiquity. Days passed as it strode resolutely to its unknown goal, brushing aside all who stood in its path. Where was it going? What was its purpose? Two men of letters came across the answer in the writings of a long-dead poet!

Silent Night

By LYSANDER KEMP

"DANA!"

It was his wife's voice from the living room, where she was watching television. Professor Goodwin scowled, but did not look up from the book he was rereading for tomorrow's lecture. "What?" he called crossly. He was already annoyed by the fact that he had to lecture on the day before Christmas, because of the speed-up.

"Dana, come look!"

"Fiddlesticks," he said to himself. She sounded excited, it must be more of that landing-on-the-moon business that had ruined the whole week. Professor Goodwin tried not

She towered like a mountain over the jeep and its driver.

to regard the doings of science too narrowly and bitterly . . . though he had good reasons for so regarding them. He could not understand, however, why everybody should be in such a tizzy of excitement. It had been known for a good half-century, ever since World War II, that space travel was the coming thing, and now it had come: a Free World Army ship had landed on the moon. So that was that. It would not widen man's cultural horizons, because the moon was uninhabited. It would only inspire some kind of retaliation by the Greater Soviet. Besides, his students had either cut their classes or talked all through them ever since the news came out three days earlier. The whole affair was a crashing bore. "If it's more of that moon business," he said, "I'm not at all interested."

"Dana, please come!" She was almost screaming. "It isn't the moon, it's the Sphinx!"

"The *what?*"

"The Sphinx!"

That was probably the name of the spaceship—he couldn't remember. He said, "Oh, thunder!" and slammed the book shut and strode into the living room. "What on earth are you screeching about?" he asked petulantly.

His wife was staring at the television screen, leaning tensely forward. "Look," she said. "It's moving. The Sphinx."

He condescended to turn his gaze upon the screen, which he ordinarily ignored as thoroughly as he could. She was right, there was a monstrosity walking across it, and it looked remarkably like the Sphinx. "Very clever," he said, a little pompously, "but that's no good reason for screeching. You know I don't like those TV 'dramas,' so-called. I don't see why you had to interrupt me."

"No," she said, without turning her glance from the screen. "It isn't a drama, it's the actual Sphinx. It's . . . walking. This is a special telecast from Egypt."

"Nonsense. You must have tuned in on a drama after it began."

"I didn't, Dana." She looked up at him, with something like fear in her eyes. "I was watching the J. J. Show, and all of a sudden they broke in to say they'd now got a helicopter to the scene and would show the Sphinx walking. I didn't hear the earlier announcement."

"It *can't* walk," he said

flatly. "It's stone. What in heaven has got into you?"

"Look at it," she said.

He looked again, contemptuously; then he stared. The picture was not too clear—he always said television had been better before they introduced all this color-and-three-dimension stuff—but it looked very much like the real thing. In fact, to all appearances the enormous stone lion with the human head, which had crouched for so many centuries in the desert, was now shambling ponderously across the sands, while several vehicles dogged it at a safe distance. If it was not the real thing, it was a most extraordinary piece of trick televising. The longer he watched, the more disturbingly sure he became that it could not be a trick.

Finally his wife broke their silence. "Dana, what does it mean?"

"I don't know. It isn't possible, it just isn't possible for a stone statue to walk . . . but I don't think it's a fake. It's like something out of a legend . . . or a nightmare."

They were silent again, watching; then she said, "Dana, it's supernatural."

He nodded.

"But we don't believe in the supernatural," she said. "Neither of us."

"We didn't. But if we have to believe what we're seeing, we have to believe in the supernatural. I don't see any way the scientists can explain this. It's beyond everything we know."

"But what does it *mean?* It has to mean *something,* Dana. Do you think it could have anything to do with the landing on the moon?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't see how it could."

They watched till late into the night, saying little, until the announcement came that the helicopter was returning to Cairo to refuel and the picture of the Sphinx went off the screen. All that time the vast stone figure had stalked slowly forward, its mysterious human visage turning neither to left nor right, always staring forward. It had skirted villages but it always returned to its straight march. It had shown no hostile intentions whatsoever. The direction in which it was trekking was generally northwest, but its destination, if it had one, could not be guessed. The Military was consulting with Egyptologists. And that was all they learned. When they went up to bed at last, in the small

hours, they felt dazedly that somehow they were living in a different world, strange and therefore frightening.

Next morning, classes were out of the question. Professor Goodwin went to the classroom for his 9:30 class on Literature of the Twentieth Century, merely because he was paid to do so, but only two students showed up, both of them in tizzies, and he dismissed them and returned to the office he shared with old Professor Baker.

Between them, he and Baker now made up the entire English Department of Harvard University. Baker could remember when the Department had included dozens of professors and instructors, and even Goodwin could remember having more than a half dozen colleagues, though he was some twenty years younger than Baker. It was tragic to see the Department shrink and wither and go the way of the Classics Department, but everything was Science now, after 50-odd years of the Cold War, but nothing could be done. Classes had been scheduled for this day, the day before Christmas, because of the rush to train more and more scientists.

Goodwin had just sat down sleepily at his desk when Baker came in. His class too, Beowulf to Shakespeare—he taught English Literature between Beowulf and the end of the Eighteenth Century, Goodwin carried it on up to the present day—could not be held. Baker greeted him, dropped his books on his desk, and said, "Well, Dana, what do you think?"

"I'm afraid I have to believe it. I saw it on television last night. It's the real thing."

"I know." Baker sat down and gazed pensively out of the window. "I'm an old man, Dana, and we oldtimers take it hard when our world is turned topsy-turvy. The moon affair was expected, I was ready to accept it. But this . . ." His voice trailed off.

"It's like a legend come true," Goodwin said after a minute. "Aren't there stories in which sculpture comes to life? Of course, Pygmalion. And doesn't a statue come to life in that Mozart opera . . . you know the one . . . *Don Giovanni?*"

"Yes," Baker said. "And there are the religious legends about sacred statues bleeding or speaking to the faithful or whatever. Seems to me I recall a poem about

the Sphinx, too. I haven't read it for ages, and I don't think it was in my field. Tennyson, maybe."

Goodwin shook his head. "There's a sphinx in one of the Greek plays about Oedipus, but of course it wasn't the Egyptian Sphinx. I don't remember any poem. It's certainly not in Tennyson, anyhow."

"I'm probably completely wrong. It's very hazy."

Suddenly Goodwin said, "My god!" and sat up straight, staring at him. "I know it! Why didn't I think of it before? It's by William Butler Yeats, can't think of the title." He jumped up, scanned the books in the tall bookcase by his desk, and plucked out a *Collected Poems* of Yeats. After turning pages for several minutes, he stopped and read a poem, then abruptly handed the open book across to Baker without a word.

Baker read it carefully. When he finished, his old hands were trembling as they passed back the volume. "That's it," he said, almost in a whisper, "that's exactly it. You'll have to announce it."

"Announce it? What do you mean?"

"Make it known. People have to know about this."

"Should I speak with the Military first, do you think?"

"It isn't really a military question at all, that I can see. There doesn't seem to be any kind of Soviet threat involved."

"What about the press, then?"

"I think that would be best."

Goodwin said, "Right," picked up the phone, and asked the campus operator for the Boston *News*. He told them who he was, and said as matter-of-factly as he could that he had some information about the Sphinx. He refused to elaborate. When he hung up, he said, "They're sending a reporter."

He and Baker talked a few minutes, and then the man from the *News* arrived. He was about Goodwin's age, a seasoned reporter: it seemed the *News* considered any lead important. After welcoming him and introducing him to Professor Baker, Goodwin asked him for the latest reports.

"It's crossed the Suez, heading north. Hasn't done any harm, so nothing's been done to try to stop it." He grinned wryly and added, "The nation's unsleeping

watchdog, Senator Murphy, says it's Soviet inspired—some sort of reprisal for our Army landing on the moon. Now, Professor, what's your story?"

"I'll have to give you some background first." The reporter nodded his okay. "Well, then, in the first part of the century—I was going to say 'this century,' but I think they still haven't decided yet whether this year 2000 is the end of the Twentieth or the beginning of the Twenty-First—there was a very good Irish poet named William Butler Yeats. During the latter part of his life he worked out a cyclical theory of history, which he used in his poems. Very briefly, he believed that history moves in great cycles of two thousand years, each great cycle divided up into two sub-cycles of a thousand years each. These great cycles of civilization begin and end in times of great confusion, and reach their highest flowering in the middle of each sub-cycle, that is, about the years five hundred and fifteen hundred of each two thousand. Take the great cycle we live in, the Christian, for example. Yeats said that our civilization has had two high points: the obvious one, the Renaissance, about fifteen hundred, and the reign of Justinian in Byzantium, about five hundred. Clear enough so far?"

The reporter looked up from his notes with a curious little smile, but he said, "Yes, please go on."

"Yeats believed that so far there have been three such grand cycles, the Babylonian, the Classical, and the Christian. Each new cycle destroys the one before it, and is destroyed in turn. He wrote a poem in which Dionysus, representing the Classical cycle, is killed by the Virgin—he calls her 'that fierce Virgin'—who represents the Christian cycle. He also wrote a poem in which he described the birth of the civilization that he believed would replace our own. It's called 'The Second Coming.'" Professor Goodwin took up the volume of Yeats, still open to the poem, and was about to read from it.

"This is very interesting, and I don't like to interrupt," the reporter said, shifting in his chair, "but it isn't much help to me. I've got to get a story, get facts. I don't want to listen to a poem. I don't even like poems."

"The poem is what I've been leading up to," Goodwin

said quietly. "Can't you hear me out?"

"Well, okay." He frowned and settled back.

"Good. It begins with a generalized description of the world in his time—he wrote it about 1925, I think. Near the very end of a great cycle, you see." He prepared to read from the poem, but suddenly changed his mind. "What he says first is that anarchy is overwhelming the world, everything is getting worse and worse, something terrible will happen. After that passage of statement, he introduces his symbol for the future, for the civilization that will destroy and replace our own."

The reporter interrupted him again, this time standing up. "I'm sorry, Professor, "but this isn't getting me anywhere. I've got other things to do. If you'll excuse me now . . ."

"Three minutes," Goodwin said. "Just three minutes. Please. It's very important."

The reporter hesitated, then sat down again without a word.

"The symbol Yeats chose to depict the civilization that would replace ours was . . . the Sphinx." He looked at the reporter intently. "Yeats did not actually call it the Sphinx in the poem, but you can't mistake it. It's in the desert, and it has—

A shape with lion body
and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless
as the sun—

and it's moving, walking, it's come alive. He chose a monster, you see, because he was living in the Christian civilization or cycle and was familiar with it, and the civilization that was going to destroy it would naturally seem terrifying. Just as Christ was a menace to the Romans . . . after all, he destroyed their world and created a new one. The poem ends with a question—

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

You did say, didn't you, that the Sphinx is heading north? Bethlehem is north."

"Yes, I did." The reporter's eyes narrowed for a moment with speculation. Then he grinned. "It's interesting," he said, getting up, "but it just won't do. It would make a good feature story later on,

(Concluded on page 91)

Frozen at the controls, he could no longer hear her voice.

THE STILL WATERS

By JOY HALL

With the death of Old Sol, the rulers of The Last City awoke to full realization that life was ended for them all unless by some miracle an avenue to survival could be found. And it was during this last hour that they learned a lesson from history's pages: the one man all others hate is usually the savior of humanity!

THE watchman in the west tower of Ragnarok, called The Last City, whimpered and dabbed once more at the eye pieces of his thermo-mask. They were quite clear. There was no mistaking this time. The wavering yellow flame in the reflecting mirror of his telescope was gone, and with it the last light and warmth in the solar system. The sun was dead. Obeying his ruler's orders, he dropped his gloved hand, almost listlessly, on the signal button. A signal now unneeded, for already the great transparent dome that enclosed all Ragnarok, the dome that had once diffused

radiance drawn from the sun, was beginning to fade. The few hundreds within knew by now that their hour of trial was at hand. They were the final inheritors of a dead, sterile earth. A worn out globe with a crust of ice thirty feet thick. The dying sun had abandoned them to the horror of ultimate space, ultimate cold and ultimate darkness.

Within the council chamber, Morgenach, the First, of Ragnarok, and thus of the earth, rested the knuckles of his left hand on the table before him. With his right hand he absently touched the button that would close the windows and shut out the thin wailing of the people in the square below. The shadowless illumination that came from the walls shone on his massive, hairless head. He stood, slightly bowed, his expressionless face turned toward the men of the council.

"Ferrash, my eldest," he said, "is to succeed me if the need arises. The perils and uncertainty of our rocket journey to the planet Tela, which is now our only choice, are being voiced by the people outside." He continued bitterly, "That abject mewling you hear is all that remains on this earth of the once proud human race. Yes, even we in this chamber sweat with fear. Our hundred centuries of science have taught us everything but the one essential: how to face the moment of extinction with something approaching equanimity."

They were like unwrapped mummies, the score that sat around the table. Hairless, immobile heads and blank faces. Only their eyes were alive and those told but one thing, baldly, without the grace of a little pride to foster concealment. That thing was fear.

"After Ferrash," he continued, "I choose you, Smit."

Smit replied, "But what about your youngest, Thane, honored First?"

"Do not speak of him in this grave hour, Smit. What ill-will do you bear me that you must remind me that I have sired an atavist?"

"I know, but . . ."

"That is enough. I will answer with facts you should know by this time. Thane has no science. He is a dreamer who delves into the lore of the long vanished past. Because he is a throw-back, he concerns himself with childish emotional stimuli he calls music, poetry, literature and art. Even the superstitious beliefs of our barbarous ancestors

have found an echo in his retrogressive mind."

"But he has courage," answered Smit. "Who else in all Ragnarok would have gone down between the fission vats to rescue a worker who had fallen there?"

"Foolhardiness, another proof of his atavism. Who cares about a worker!"

"And when lightning wrecked the control tower on top of the dome," continued Smit, "was there any but Thane who dared to face the cold and dangerous climb?"

Ferrash, who had been sitting through all this in silence, now spoke up bitterly.

"And the people, they worship Thane. They still have some feeling for what you have just called emotional stimuli."

"That is enough, Ferrash," cried Morgenach, "Smit, will you or will you not accept the responsibility offered you?"

"I accept, honored First," replied Smit. "Andra has dispatched a message to our colony on Tela, though they won't have to bestir themselves immediately since our journey will take fifteen months."

"Esteemed First of Ragnarok," pleaded a councilman, "my staff reports that we have less than two hours of heat and power left in the city. I need scarcely point out the urgency for speed. The temperature reading outside the dome is already minus 219 degrees Reaumur. The automatic launching mechanism has begun to freeze. Nobody knows what prolonged cold may do to it."

"Let the loud speakers carry my orders," cried Morgenach. "The people are to assemble at the elevators to the rocket port in an hour's time. They are to bring nothing but the clothes they stand in. Every ounce has been calculated for concentrated supplies. We will meet back here again in five minutes, for I have another matter for discussion which Ferrash has just brought to my attention."

The girl turned away from the dark window, drawing her heavy robe closer around her. Its high collar framed a mass of tawny copper hair and the pale, lovely oval of her face. The young man with her covered her hands with his own and pressed them warmly. His blue eyes eagerly scanned her face, drinking in every line and contour of its loveliness.

"Thane, I'm worried," said the girl softly. "Already the

cold is creeping through the walls."

"Do not think about it, dear Selena," replied Thane. "Think instead of Tela. They say it is like our earth was thousands of years ago, with the seasons when there is no ice and things grow in the ground. Some of the colony are learning to take nourishment from these plants as our remote ancestors did, instead of the synthetic foods we use now. Think what it will be like to see and touch a living tree."

"I don't think I'd care to," answered Selena. "They look so . . . You live always in the past, Thane. Your pictures and those strange sounds you say are music, and the stranger notions which you have gathered from those archaic books. Those things may, and perhaps will, have value later on, but for now why can't you be like your brother, Ferrash? One day he will even outstrip your father in science."

It was the old reproach Thane had faced since childhood. He had lived in an alien world from that day when he first discovered the photographs, listened to the music, and translated the books preserved for milleniums, deep in the earth, in their imperishable cylinder. He had always felt a strange kinship to that vanished world. The present had become like an unhappy dream from which he longed to awaken.

"I am very fond of you, Thane," Selena went on, "for I do understand you. But I wish you would try to forget your recordings for awhile and make something of yourself, even if you are so different. Imagine a man with hair growing on top of his head, and a habit of smiling, which is something few people ever do in Ragnarok. What is in that box you have beside you?"

"It wouldn't interest you."

"Would I have asked?"

"Well," answered Thane, "for years we have known that this day was inevitable. I have transferred to micro-tape all the photographs of our lost world, the best of the music, the greatest of the writing and philosophy transcribed into speech."

"Ferrash has told me about your micro-tape recordings," said Selena. "He realizes what great value they will be on Tela. But he does not believe as you do. He wants to use your recordings for a different purpose."

"But what other purpose *could* they be used for?" demanded Thane. "Selena, do you know that there are near-

ly a thousand casettes fitted into this box, each with its proper label. Tela will be a richer planet some day for this box which I will bring to Tela."

"Wrong as usual, Brother Thane," said Ferrash from behind them.

"Ferrash!" cried Thane in surprise.

"If you had been listening to our father's orders, instead of boring Selena with your idiotic prattle, you would know how wrong you are. The Council has just decided, through my suggestions, that I should be the only one to handle your recordings from now on. It seems that you have a greater power in your hands than you realize. The men of the Council have decided that it would be more appropriate for me to control that power. Because of the great value of the casettes, they do not wish to give the recordings to the people of Tela, but to use them only when and how as I see fit."

"But that is not right," cried Thane frantically. "These are my recordings and they have no right to take them from me and use them to their advantage."

"Would you rather I destroy them?" asked Ferrash slyly. "Humm . . . encased in plexite. I have often wondered how plexite would withstand a drop of thirteen stories."

"No, Ferrash, please!" cried Selena.

"You shall not do this, brother," shouted Thane, and he threw himself at Ferrash.

Physical violence has been unknown in The Last City for centuries, and this little atavist's deed was a thing beyond the pale. As he struggled with his larger brother, his hand unconsciously closed into a fist. He had never done such a thing before except to grasp something; no one did. But now his hand was a hard ball. Something was taking place within him that he did not understand. It was like a vague memory, almost forgotten, tantalizing. Then up from the dark pit of time came an impulse so compelling it took the place of his conscious will. He did a thing unheard and undreamed of among the people of his tiny caged-in world. With a gasp, Ferrash fell heavily to the floor.

"Thane," cried Selena, "you have hurt him. You have hurt your own brother. Ferrash, Ferrash, open your eyes!"

Thane tried to explain, but it was impossible. Silently he let himself out. Again defeat, always defeat, he thought. Now he had lost Selena. He

had done a criminal thing to protect those things of beauty and wisdom; his treasures, now no longer his, as he had to give them up. He was dangerous. They would lock him up now. His father had often said that no one could trust an atavist. Perhaps they would give him to the doctors to operate on; but that would be on Tela. Tela, with a sun of its own, and a free sky and green growing things. He could remember much of the music and the great thoughts from the books. He could take his thought along without adding an ounce to the cargo of the rocket ship. Somehow, he would redeem himself on Tela. Perhaps even with Selena.

"Thane, Thane," called an excited figure running toward him.

"What has happened?" asked Thane.

"I can't stop now," replied his friend and messenger of the Council. "I must reach your brother at once. We could not reach him by telecast."

"What are you talking about, Charl? Pull yourself together."

"The rocket, Thane. The automatic launching controls are frozen. That leaves only the manual controls in the central tower. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes," replied Thane very solemnly, "I know."

The luminescence in the walls of the Council chamber was beginning to fade. In with the creeping cold and darkness came the silence of infinite space. Ringed by the mummy shapes of the heavily robed council, Morgenach stood once more before them. He had just come from the rocket port. Eagerly the half circle of eyes scanned his dark, brooding face for some shred of hope. Morgenach spoke quietly.

"The people have been told of our grave dilemma. I have pleaded with them for a volunteer to remain behind to operate the manual launching controls. Not one moved from his place in the rocket, though I told them that if it is not launched and we use the rocket power to heat the city, they can survive only a few weeks at the most. Even my son, Thane, who is supposed to have courage, and who was somewhere amongst them, kept himself hidden."

Very bitterly he went on.

"I see now that my appeal will succeed no better here. With all our mental power and control of material forces,

what poor stuff the men of this earth have become."

Morgenach eyed a dark face in the corner, nursing a swollen jaw.

"Well, Ferrash—silent, I see. But then you have already failed one simple task. What is your answer then, my cowardly friends? Well, here is mine. You all are aware that without my navigation the chances of the rocket reaching Tela are slight. That is why I have not heretofore offered myself. However, a start is better than sure death here, though, if it were not for the women and children, I would cheerfully watch you freeze. I now place Ferrash in complete command. Hurry to your places in the rocket before I change my mind. I bid you farewell and a safe voyage."

The sound of a chime broke in at this point.

"Honored First," replied a familiar voice, "I respectfully urge that the launching proceed immediately. The temperature in the control tower is such that even the manual controls may become useless if there is a delay."

As the tension broke, the room overflowed with sound. The Councilmen were all talking at once, jubilantly flapping the sleeves of their robes, shaking hands, calling across the rooms to friends; in short, behaving as no council in Ragnarok had behaved in five hundred years. Then they streamed happily through the wide doors of the chamber, a careless eddy around the figure who stood with bowed head.

As he sat in the control tower, which was raised above the very pinnacle of the dome that encased all Ragnarok, Thane remembered the last time he had visited there. It had been during an inspection tour with his father and brother. The three of them had crowded into the tiny cubicle to view the rows of dials and levers. Their father had explained the comparatively simple operation of manual launching. There had been enough of the sun left then to provide a feeble light, and through the transparent walls of the tower and the dome, they could see Ragnarok far below, while beyond, in every direction, stretched endless vistas of glittering ice.

But now, though it was barely past mid-day, Thane seemed suspended alone in an inky void. That last of the power from the city had been switched to the tower so that the dials glowed. There was a light above his head, but be-

yond this pale gleam the inpenetrable dark waited patiently, sure of its victim. A door sighed open.

"You are surprised that I have come, my son," said Morgenach.

"I was even now awaiting the signal, Sire," replied Thane. "I thought you would be in the pilot's cabin of the rocket."

"I shall be soon enough, Thane, soon enough. Is your thermo-suit comfortable — fully charged?"

"I'm quite well, honored First," answered Thane. "In an hour or two the thermo-suit will not matter much, will it? Are you ill, Sire?"

From childhood, his father had shown him but one face, impassive, cold and superior. That face was changing before his eyes. It held real warmth. He did not remember his mother, but he had caught that look on Selena's face when she was kind to him. As the change took place, Morgenach spoke words that were not those of the First of Ragnarok. Sentences that Thane could not remotely imagine him speaking. They came with difficulty through rigid lips.

"My son, I am here to seek your pardon for the scorn and contempt that have been your heritage. The blame is wholly mine. Such an error in judgment makes me unworthy of the position I occupy. Tell me, Thane, what prompted you to make this decision? Besides courage, what germ of greatness have you—a throw-back, brought from a past we have been so smugly deriding?"

"I have no greatness in myself, Sire," replied Thane. "It is just that things read in a favorite book have made me wish to pattern myself after those concepts. I am sure that the decision would have been approved by the great man who inspired the book."

"So it is from a book," said Morgenach. "Is that book in the box containing the microtape records that Ferrash has been telling me about and that we have discussed in council meetings?"

"Yes."

"Thane, since you have proved through your sacrifice that there is really something of value there, I have reversed my decision about your recordings. That book, for instance. I have been wrong part of the way; why not all of the way? We are badly lacking in something; perhaps it's in this box. I will not leave it in Ferrash's care nor in the hands of the Council. Since you are not coming with us, I will

take the box to Tela myself and give it to the people of Tela to share, as you would have wanted it."

There in the softly lighted cubicle, suspended in space, Thane tried to reply. This was his moment of triumph. His precious records were to be saved and given to the new world of Tela as a priceless heritage. But the words would not come.

Instead he mumbled, "The hydraulic locks on the dome escapement are already half frozen, Sire."

"Yes, yes, we will hurry. This is unbearable cold."

"Wait one moment longer," cried Thane, and he opened the box. "I would like to hear this once more. It is from the book I spoke of. There is no time now, but will you play it back for me from the rocket before you are out of range?"

"Of course, Thane," replied his father tenderly.

Thane started to adjust the levers before him. With a gesture that was awkward because it was unaccustomed, Morgenach placed his hand on his son's head, and then turning swiftly he entered the elevator.

Soon the rocket was gone, and Thane was recovering from the violence of its departure. A section of the dome that covered Ragnarok had swung open. There had been a cataclysmic roar and a blinding flash of blue light. The tower leapt and shook, tumbling Thane from his seat at the controls. By the time he had struggled to his knees, he could see for the last time the dome and the ice fields bathed in brilliant azure from the exhaust of the receding rocket. But the waiting dark soon swallowed up even this. Thane climbed stiffly back on the seat. The shock had opened cracks in the tower, and Thane knew that death would be swifter now. With numbing fingers he adjusted wires that had been torn loose. Before him was a two way tele-screen which suddenly snapped into brilliance. It was like looking into a lighted window at the people in the communications room of the rocket, and they in turn could see and speak to him.

For the first time, Thane found himself an important person. One by one, people were coming to the screen to pay him homage, including Councilmen who had ignored or laughed at him in the past. Thane sat very straight and smiled and nodded at them, holding himself rigid so that they would not notice he was

shivering. Even Ferrash came.

"Can you ever forgive me, Thane, for being so wrong?"

"I had forgiven you a long time ago," replied Thane.

Thane's limbs were growing numb. On the polished surface of one of the dials, he could see his reflection. It came as a shock that it no longer looked like his own face, it was so pinched and blue. Selena was approaching the screen. With an effort that wrenched out a grunt of agony, Thane reached out and shut off the sending side of the screen. The screen on the rocket would be dark now. Selena's face was close and full of tenderness and anxiety.

"What has happened to the screen, Thane?" she cried. "Are you all right?"

"Hello—Selena."

"But I can't see you, Thane."

"It's broken down—the launching damaged—it. How is the rocket, darling? Are you happy?"

"Oh, Thane, Thane!"

The brilliance of the screen before him was beginning to dim to a marked degree. Was it the distance, or were his eyes failing? He found he was quite unable to move now. And with the helplessness, fear began to trickle in. He was truly alone. The last man on a dead world.

He tried to remember the words in the book—a prayer, anything—but his mind was too confused. In growing terror he grasped vainly at the fading illusion of nearness to the people on the rocket.

"Father, Father," he cried, "don't shut off the screen."

"It is on full power, my son," came a voice from the speaker.

"The casette—you promised!"

The light in the ceiling of cubicle flickered out as the power supply in the abandoned city diminished. Only the dials and gauges still glowed faintly, and their time was short. The final horror, the triumph of the waiting darkness was at hand. Then, all at once, with a deep resonance, a voice from the speaker filled the darkened cubicle.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

The light in the hydro-electric gauge vanished.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters."

Gradually the terror subsided in Thane's breast. It seemed strange, but he was not cold any longer. Green pastures, they were lush and green like the pictures. A

breeze rippled the tall grasses and stirred up a fragrance he had never known before.

"He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

There were billowing white clouds, and over all was a feeling of warmth and light. Forgotten was the eternal ice and the stark, doomed prison he had known all his life. It was like awaking from an evil dream.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . ."

Later, as a young telecast engineer on the rocket rewound the casette he spoke to a friend near him.

"That archaic stuff sounds nice, Walter. I wonder what it means?"

His words were faint and distorted when they came through the ice encrusted mesh of the speaker in the cubicle. But it did not matter. Not any more. **THE END**

SILENT NIGHT

(Concluded from page 79)

as an interesting coincidence, but right now we need an explanation, we need facts, not symbols and myths. Maybe the Soviet angle will pan out, even with Murphy the Watchdog messing it up." He moved toward the door. "I used to like poetry pretty well when I was a college kid, but it's . . . well, it's dead now. If you'll pardon me for saying so. But thanks anyway, Professor."

"Not at all." Goodwin rose and opened the door. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

"No, it was a pleasure. Have a merry Christmas."

When the reporter was gone, he sat down wearily at his desk. "Now what?"

"I don't know," Baker said. "Perhaps he's right. Perhaps that's why there's only two of us left in the Department. Poetry *is* dead, you know, to all intents and purposes."

"No, he's wrong." He stared at the open book. "I'm afraid he's wrong."

It was reported in the afternoon that the Sphinx was approaching Bethlehem. Early that same evening, Christmas Eve, Professor Goodwin felt vindicated—though scarcely gratified—when forty great cities, in the Free World and the Greater Soviet, vanished in forty flashes of atomic fire.

THE END

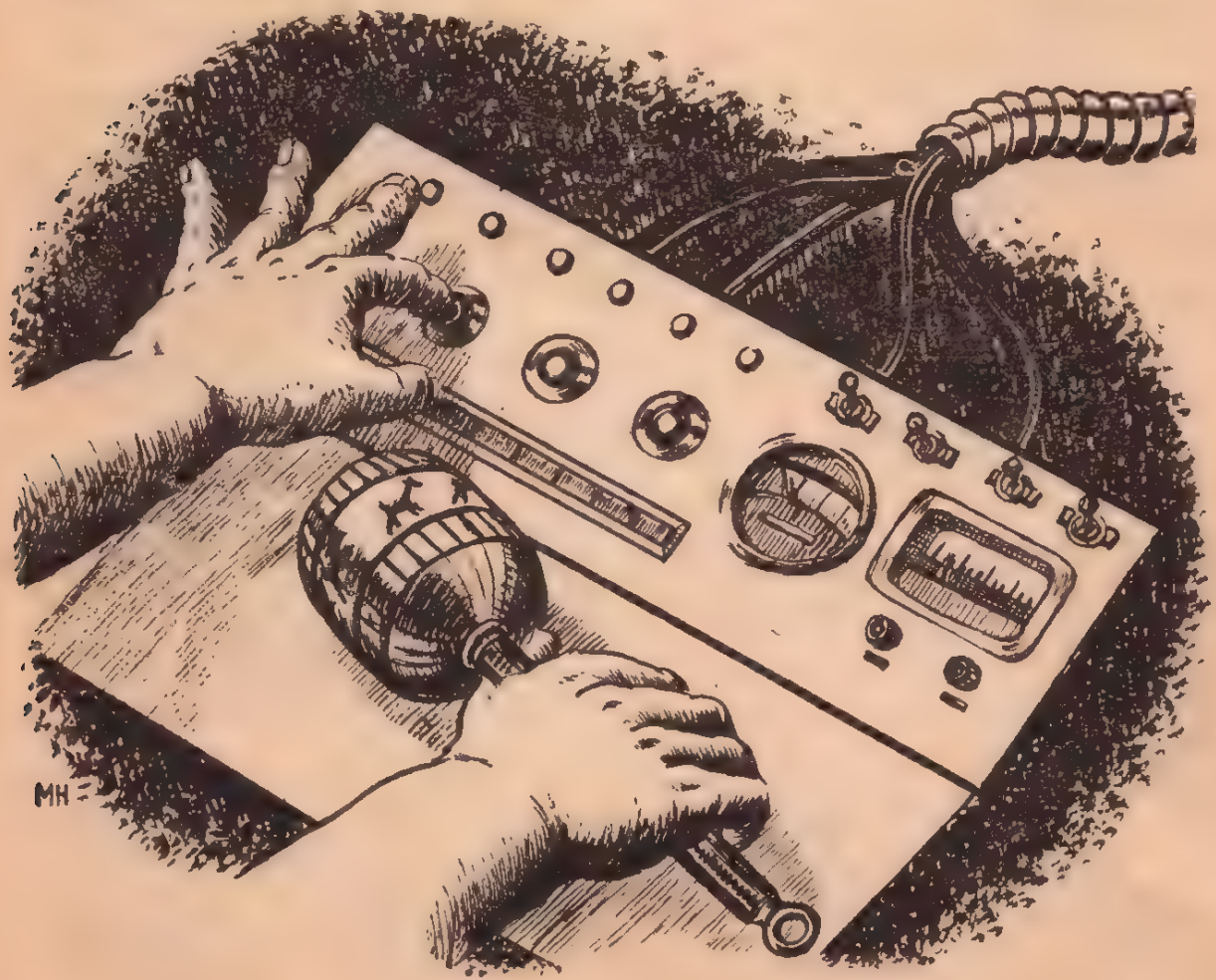
By RICHARD WILSON

KILLER *in the crib*

Nobody could tell Phillip Lyde that he didn't have the smartest kid in town. And then one day he found out that babies should play with rattles instead of the atom bomb!

IT WAS three days after Joel's first birthday that Philip Lyde first had the feeling that his son was a lot brighter than even a doting father could expect him to be.

They'd had a party for him. Just the three of them. There was a tiny cake with one huge candle stuck into the middle



Under the touch of baby fingers death poured from the sky.

of it. Catherine had consulted the pediatrician and then baked a cake that even Joel could eat without coming out in spots. They put a paper hat on the baby's head and Philip took flash photos. They tape-recorded the sounds of the party, holding the microphone to Joel's lips occasionally in the hope that he might just choose this historic day to speak his first word.

Philip had four sets of prints made of the photographs — one each for the grandparents, one for the baby book and one to take to the office and show the fellows.

Irwin, the salesman, who had an eighteen-month-old son of his own, examined the prints with reciprocal interest at the office water-cooler.

"How'd you get him to keep his paper hat on?" Irwin asked. "Glue?"

"No trouble," said Philip. "Why?"

"I tried that once. No luck. My Harry snatched it right off, but instantly, and proceeded to eat it."

"Talent. Some have it, that's all."

"Yeah," said Irwin. "Sure. But he is a bright-looking kid, Phil. Took these yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I can tell by this picture. Your boy has the proper contempt for a damfool amateur photographer — especially a father making a jackass of himself trying to get a good shot of the son and heir. See? If that isn't a sneer on young Joel's face then I've never seen one. It's a dead ringer for the one I get all the time from Soskin, the buyer at Kaufmann's in Pittsburgh."

Irwin was joking, of course, but as Philip Lyde looked at the snapshots again later he couldn't explain away the expression the camera had caught. It wasn't a trick of the lighting, or a bad angle. Of course it was just the way Joel's face happened to be at that fraction of a second, in all innocence, but there was no other word for it. It was a sneer, and it upset him more than he cared too admit.

It was Thursday evening and Catherine was away at her ceramics class. Philip set up the play pen in the living room and popped Joel into it with a cardboard box full of toys to keep him occupied while he fooled with the tape recorder. He was considering editing the tape of the first birthday party and transcribing three minutes of the highlight onto a conventional phonograph record to send to his

parents in Cleveland. Catherine's parents, who lived just across town, were coming next week and Philip also decided he'd better give the tape a run-through first to see how much of it they could stand.

Joel had tipped the box on its side and taken out his favorite animal, a limp rubber horse that he seemed to like better now than when it had been inflated. He munched on one rubber foot with his seven teeth and sat watching his father.

Philip sped the tape past a symphony and a mystery program they had recorded experimentally from the radio, trying to outguess the commercials, and came to the party segment. He winked at Joel and started it up.

"Say something, Joel," Philip heard his voice saying. "Say Mommy. Mom-my."

Joel had moved his lips encouragingly, Philip recalled, though he hadn't said anything.

But apparently he had. The sensitive microphone had picked up the sound their ears had not.

It was just one word.

A chilling tingle started at Philip's scalp and crawled down his back.

Joel was looking directly into his eyes. The rubber horse dropped. The baby's face showed as much intelligence as any adult's. It showed shocked surprise and a sudden malevolence that matched the word he had uttered on his first birthday.

Philip's hand shook as he set the tape back. Not wanting to, but compelled, he started it again and turned up the volume.

Joel had got to his feet now, and was standing at the railing of the pen, both his baby hands tense on the slats.

"Say something, Joel," Philip's voice boomed. "Say Mommy. *Mom-my.*"

The baby voice came then, alien and horribly distinct.

"Fools!" it said.

Philip had had two stiff shots and was nursing a third when Catherine came back. He was sitting at the kitchen table, his eyes staring out of focus at a red flower in the pattern of the plastic tablecloth. The door to the living room was closed.

Catherine looked at her husband and the glass in his hand and the bottle at his elbow.

She let her purse thud to the tabletop.

"Well!" she said.

The baby, who had been utterly still since Philip snapped off the tape recorder and ran out of the room, began to cry

when he heard her voice. The crying became piteous and insistent.

"Look at you!" Catherine said. "How long has this been going on?"

She went into the living room and came back with Joel in her arms. He stopped crying.

"The poor child is soaked," she said. "Philip! What kind of father are you? Look at him!"

Philip forced himself to look. Catherine's eyes were blazing at him contemptuously. Joel, his head nestling against her shoulder so she couldn't see his face, was looking at him too. The expression on his infant face was a cool, confident smirk.

Philip tore his eyes away and tossed down the liquor. He got up, knocking over the chair. Without picking it up he half ran to the hall closet and got his coat.

He ran out of the house.

"Philip!" his wife yelled after him.

He turned once, at the street, and looked back. The two of them were at the window, the baby's head close to Catherine's, looking after him.

He ran until the house was out of sight.

It was a bar loud with talk and a juke box. The noise soothed him, but not enough. He must have looked wild, because the bartender hesitated before serving him a double shot and asked, "You all right, Mac?"

"Argument with the wife," he improvised. The bartender nodded and said nothing more. He poured the glass to the brim and left the bottle.

God! Philip forced himself to drink slowly. He took a sip and lit a cigaret shakily. He tried to concentrate on the words accompanying the guitar-thwanging, piano-thumping popular song blasting out of the gaudy Wurlitzer. They only reminded him of how he had sent up the volume of his own machine and heard that improbable word.

He tried to blank that out of his mind and concentrated on reading the fine print on the label of a brandy bottle at the back of the bar. It reminded him of the bottle on his own kitchen table, and the boy-creature in the next room, silent as death, likely staring with God knows what expression at the closed door between them. With God knows what thoughts inside that baby skull, under that curly blond hair.

Philip took another sip. It burned good as it went down

but it didn't help him forget.

He realized he was sweating. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead, his upper lip and the back of his neck. He felt cold and suddenly he was shivering all over. He forced himself to stop and down the rest of the whiskey.

The bartender was a good one, one of the psychic kind, apparently. He had been busy at the other end of the bar, but then he was opposite Philip, pouring another drink, again to the brim.

"Don't brood about it, Mac," he said. "It'll work itself out. Always does."

"Sure," said Philip, grateful to him. "Thanks."

"Everybody and their brother's here tonight, or I'd stick around, if it'd help any. Feel free to pour your own if I'm busy."

"Thanks," he said again. I'll be all right."

The two men on his right were talking baseball and the man and girl on his left, obviously theater people, were comparing Alfred and Lynn with Rex and Lilli. After a while, by concentrating his eyes on the brandy bottle label and his ears on the simultaneous conversations, he began to feel more normal. Finally, midway through his third drink—his sixth, counting the three at home—he stopped feeling scared.

He didn't discount what he'd heard on the tape or what he'd seen in Joel's face, but now he could think about them rationally, as if these things had happened to somebody else. He pretended they had happened to his friend Roy and tried to imagine what he would say to his friend Roy.

Roy, he would say, first let me say that I believe you. I postulate that this actually happened, that you weren't mistaken. Now, then—

But he couldn't think of any Now, then.

Except Catherine. He had hated both of them, irrationally, when he rushed out of the house. Now he no longer hated, or feared, but he did feel concern for his wife, alone in the house, with—it.

He got up, leaving some change on the bar, and smiled and nodded to the bartender to show him he was all right now, and went home.

A small light had been left for him. He listened at the doors of the nursery and the bedroom. Both the baby and Catherine were asleep. There was no note. He left one for his wife, saying he was sorry and that he'd explain in the morning, then brushed his

teeth vigorously and went to bed.

He was hard to arouse in the morning. When he did wake up there was time only to race through a shave and drink a cup of coffee before he dashed for his bus.

He wondered if he was subconsciously trying to avoid telling Catherine about Joel.

But that evening, as he called Catherine from the office to say he'd have to work a bit later and not to wait supper for him, he admitted to himself that he was trying to avoid Joel.

He did have some work to do, though it could have waited, and he finished it while he ate a sent-out-for sandwich. Then he dawdled, cleaning up his desk and looking out the window at the deserted business street.

He reached home after the baby had been put to bed.

Catherine didn't holler at him, as he felt he deserved.

"I made drinks," she said. "No offense intended, but would you like a hair of the dog?"

"I would," he said. "Mastiff sized. You'd better have a stiff one yourself. I've got something to show you."

"Oh?"

He went to the tape recorder. "Better take a good swallow of that first," he said. "This may be a shock."

She looked puzzled but said nothing. She obediently took a long drink from her glass.

"This is why I got drunk last night," he said, and started the machine. "Listen."

His voice came from the tape:

"Say something, Joel. Say Mommy. Mom-my."

Philip braced himself.

But there was only silence where there should have been that single unearthly word.

Then Catherine's voice came from the tape:

"Say Daddy, Joel. Dad-dy."

Philip switched off the machine. He looked at his wife with amazement. "He didn't say anything!"

"That's nothing to get drunk about," she said. "You can't expect him to perform on cue. He'll talk in good time."

"I'm not talking about that." He set the tape back and ran it again. But again there was a silence, even when he turned the volume up, where there should have been that other voice.

"I couldn't have been mistaken," he muttered. "I *heard* it."

"What?"

"Has anyone been fooling with this machine?"

"Of course not. You're the only one who ever touches it. You made the rule yourself."

"Was Joel in here today?" The question blurted out.

"Yes, he was. I set up his play pen here and put him in it while I did some washing down the basement. But I doubt very much that he climbed over the railing and recited Hamlet's soliloquy into your precious machine."

"So he *was* in here." Philip stared at the machine in horror. "It's worse than I thought."

"What, for heaven's sake?" she asked exasperated.

"Somebody," he said slowly, "has wiped the tape. In just one spot, deleting just one word. Expertly."

Joel first communicated with Philip late the next morning, while Catherine was out doing her Saturday shopping.

Catherine had gone on her way unperturbed by Philip's oddness, which she was satisfied was the result of a drunken fantasy.

She reminded him of the time he'd got high as the Matterhorn on Gibsons and explained to her quite seriously about the green lion-head marmosets that lived under the studio couch in the living room. He'd pleaded with her to be careful when she vacuumed under there, because they were very tiny and might easily be sucked into the dust bag. She didn't see them, he realized, because she had green eyes and they filtered out the image of the marmosets.

Philip protested that he'd been making that up, about the marmosets, to amuse her, and she knew it, but she laughed and went off to the supermarket with her wheeled grocery basket.

Joel acted like a normal year-old baby for perhaps three-quarters of an hour. He made a mess in his diaper like any infant and Philip changed him, even forgetting himself so far as to go "bra-a-ack" with his lips against Joel's belly-button. The baby laughed uproariously, and quite normally.

Joel had his lunch in his high chair, fussing a bit over the chopped meat that Philip was spooning into him, but greedily putting away the mashed carrots and puree of apricots. Joel submitted to the face-washing ritual afterwards with fewer protests than usual and allowed his bib to be removed. Philip put the bib in the hamper and hung up the washcloth.

Then he sat down again

opposite his son and said, only half-jokingly:

"You're not as dumb as you look, boy."

The baby expression on Joel's face vanished, as if on cue. It was replaced by an adult, intelligent look.

"I'm not dumb at all," Joel said. He spoke with the barest trace of a baby lisp. "The voice reproducer told you that."

Philip started to tremble. He forced himself to stop by gripping the sides of his chair. He tried to force himself to think rationally, but had less success.

His thoughts went back to Catherine's pregnancy, when they were picking out boys' and girls' names. They'd decided it would be Tracy if a girl, and Catherine was holding out for Joel for a boy. Philip objected on the grounds that Joel Lyde would be ambiguous. People hearing his name would think it was Joe Elide. Catherine refused to listen and when a boy was born he was recorded as Joel Lyde.

And now he's Joe Elide, Philip thought crazily. He's elided the years between infancy and adulthood. Skipped from *goos* and *urghs* to mature speech.

"Joe Elide," Philip said vaguely, dropping his gaze from the eyes of this person who had once been his infant son. "Wonder boy." He stared at the feet, which were still baby feet.

"Joel Lyde," the other said. "The name you gave me. You're confused, aren't you?"

"That's putting it mildly," Philip said to the feet. "I'm scared to death."

"You should not fear me. I'm your son still. But I'm also your son plus. There are really two of us."

"Two of you," Philip said dully, not looking up.

"You're trying to understand, aren't you? I'm glad of that. You do have a modicum of intelligence."

"Thanks," said Philip bitterly, in a reflex.

"Good. I had hoped the insult would sting you out of your torpor."

"Who the hell *are* you?" asked Philip, still coasting on the reflex. He looked at the child now, almost angrily.

"Another kind of human being, from another place. A scout, you might say. I've come to look you over."

"See anything?" asked Philip, stung again. Then he felt tricked, as if he were the child using childhood retorts to this other, so much more the grown-up.

"I see a good man," the other said, perhaps flatteringly, "trying manfully to understand what he cannot possibly understand without further explanation. I have been rude. I apologize. I am indebted to you for having taken me in."

"*I'm* the one who's been taken in," Philip said. He felt almost superior again, having turned a phrase.

"An idiom, I suppose." The head nodded and the expression on the infant face was so sage that Philip smiled. "Good. We approach each other more closely. That is part of my mission."

"So now you have a mission. Fifty-three weeks old and already you have a mission." Philip got up suddenly and stood looking down at the person in the high chair. "You'll forgive me if I babble, but I feel drunker now than the other night when I really was."

"I forgive you," the other said, "because I know your limitations. You're only human—"

"And you?" Philip interrupted. "What are you?"

"I'll tell you," Joel's voice said.

There was a speck of land in a great sea on a tiny planet circling a double sun. Once the land had been more and the sea less, and the people had prospered. But now the waters lapped at the edges of the planet's tallest mountain and the end of their world was in sight. Subterranean explosions occurred now and again and after each the land settled a little deeper into the water. The survivors moved higher on the slopes, or tried to find room on the great central plateau, already overcrowded.

Everyone knew how it would end. Members of the Science Guild put aside their minor differences and agreed broadly on the alternatives. There weren't many. It was impossible to reverse evolution and become a water-dwelling race—not in the few years that remained to them before the mountaintop was inundated. Nor was it possible to build a sunken world. Several attempts had been made but each time the explosion that shrank the land also sent the subterranean tunnels and caverns crashing in, or flooded them.

Two things remained possible for the people of the mountain. They were escape by air or escape by sea.

Each course had it faults and its perils. Those who fled

by sea would be fleeing to nowhere. Perhaps generations would be born and die before the ocean receded again or another mountain thrust its head above the waves. They would have to subsist on the rain they could gather, the food they could grow and the fish they could catch. The ships would have to be immense to provide room for these vital activities. And they could build only a dozen or so in the time left to them, and not everyone could be accommodated.

Escape by air was a bigger gamble. They would be going beyond the air, in search of another planet that could support them. They'd sent out spaceships before. Many had been lost. The few that came back reported no possibility of life on any of the four other worlds circling their double sun. But they had since built better ships, which could range beyond their solar system, to explore the worlds of other stars.

"I am from one of the spaceships," the adult-baby voice of Joel said. "It has been a long journey. My grandparents were among the original passengers, all of them dead now. My parents and their generation also died en route. But the third generation lives. And we have found our world."

Philip had been sitting slumped in his chair, listening without apparent emotion. Now he said mildly, as if he were merely stating the literal truth:

"I thought it was *our* world."

"You shall share it with us. There are not many of us."

"Decent of you."

"You've expressed no curiosity about how I came to be in your son's body," the other said, as if he resented the apathy with which Philip had heard about his people's epic journey. "Shall I tell you about that?"

"If you like."

"I'll make it as simple as I can, to put no strain on your intelligence."

"Thanks," Philip said.

They "anchored" their spaceships in an orbit near the Moon. Their instruments indicated that the mother world of the satellite would be suitable for habitation. But the instruments also revealed that the world was inhabited already and that the inhabitants had a technology advanced enough to be dangerous, especially when coupled with the low boiling-point of their culture. In oth-

er words, the inhabitants might shoot first at a scout ship hurtling down from the Moon, and then try to put the pieces together to learn what had been inside it.

There were too few of them to risk any such disaster, so physical exploration of the new world was deferred. There would have to be, first, a psychic invasion.

(The word *invasion* was a slip, Philip thought. He maintained his indolent posture, but something was ticking over in his mind now. He did not know what it was, yet, but he encouraged it to keep ticking.)

The travelers from the far-off mountaintop world had perfected new skills during the long years of their journey through the void. They developed a means of traveling mentally, from mind to mind, among themselves.

It wasn't easy. It required the utmost concentration. Even then, blocks were sometimes encountered, or a kind of mental static, which could prevent a transfer that previously had taken place with ease.

"And so we traveled to your world, from our anchorage at the satellite, by mental means," said Joel's voice. The baby body sat in the high chair, its face adult and its fat infant arms gesticulating. "We found suitable bodies and we entered them. We're here—in the bodies—merely as observers, seeing your world through native eyes, helping decide when and how the spaceships should come down, and where our people, in their own bodies, would find it best to settle."

(He's lying now, Philip thought. He wouldn't be telling me all this if he weren't lying for a purpose. He needs me for something. Something he and his mind travelers can't do for themselves.)

"And then?" Philip said aloud.

"Then we scouts leave the bodies where we've been guests, with thanks for the hospitality. We'll become merely another of the thousands of races upon your planet, bothering no one, not displacing any of you. We're very like you—a little shorter, a little fatter, perhaps. Our needs are simple and our technology is advanced. We could settle somewhere in the vastness of Africa or the central desert of Australia—land useless to you—and develop it to serve us. By thus redeeming waste land, we would also be of real service to you."

"I see," Philip said noncommittally.

He was considering asking if all the mind travelers had lodged themselves in the bodies of infants when his wife opened the front door and the conversation came to an end.

"How's the marmoset situation?" Catherine called to him as she wheeled her market basket into the kitchen.

Joel had snapped back to babyhood. He gave his mother an infant smile and the clumsy, wrist-swiveling wave he'd learned.

Philip looked at him closely, but was unable to tell anything.

"Nobody here but us extraterrestrials," Philip muttered.

Philip was awake, staring at the dim whiteness of the bedroom ceiling long after his wife had fallen asleep.

"Daddy!"

It was his son calling. He knew that instantly as he sat up and swung his feet to the floor. It was his son, speaking for himself—not the alien speaking through him. He didn't know why or how. He just knew.

He ran to the nursery. Joel was standing in his crib in the dark. Philip snapped on the light and saw his frightened eyes.

He lifted the baby out of the crib and sat down with him in his lap.

"What is it, son? What's the matter?"

"I'm scared, Daddy. I'm grown up all of a sudden, I guess. Is it being grown up when there's somebody in with you and you learn to talk?"

Philip felt cold and frightened again. But he struggled now to accept the abnormal as the normal, knowing only that this was his son talking and not the other.

"People grow up in different ways, Joel," he said. He held the boy close to his chest and stroked his soft hair. "Don't be afraid. Is—is he in with you now?"

"No. He went away. He had something to do. He's coming back but he went away and I called you when he did. I learned to talk after he was in with me but he didn't know it, I don't think. I learned all of a sudden. I don't like him, Daddy."

"I don't like him either, Joel. We'll have to figure out what to do. When he's in with you, what happens? Does he make you do what he wants?"

"No. He sort of—displaces me. I feel everything just like

before, but I'm also outside someplace, watching. Like when he climbed out of the play pen and did that to the tape recorder. I felt myself climbing out, even though I knew I couldn't by myself, but at the same time I was up in the middle of the room, like, watching him do it. It's scarey."

"Where did he go? Do you know?"

"Back to the ship. To report. They all had to go back at the same time."

"You know about the others?"

"Yes. I know everything he knows. He su-per-im-posed —that's a hard one—his mind on mine and when he went away it left a pattern. He told you a lot of lies, Daddy, like the one about the way his people look. Not like us. They're big, and stick out all over, and they're hard and shiny, like glass."

"What about the others—the other mind travelers? Were they all in with babies of your age, or were some of them in with grown-ups?"

"All babies. They couldn't get in with grown-ups. They could only superimpose on minds whose thought patterns hadn't formed. A year old was the best age because they were old enough to do things if they were directed, but not so old that there was any rejection of an alien. I know about some of the babies they were in with."

"Who?"

"The son of the Assistant Under Secretary of State. The son of Dr. Nils Bolstadt of the University of Chicago. The daughter of the secretary to the president of General Electric. The grandson of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff . . . I feel so funny, Daddy, knowing all these things and not knowing what they mean."

Philip held the boy close to him. He felt like a monster, grilling this infant who'd had an alien mind printed on his. But he had to do it. He had to learn all he could, while he could, dispassionately, before the alien returned. For his son's sake, for the sake of all of them, he had to forget for now that Joel was physically an infant and instead to pump his supercharged brain for all the information it held.

"You're being wonderful, Joel," he said. "Now, why did he get in with you? All those other children are close to big important people, but I'm only a clerk in a business office. What do they want with me?"

"You're the Average Man. They talked tel-e-path-i-cal-ly about you. The one who was in with me was trying to find out how you thought about their coming, and things like that. That's why he talked to you through me. The others didn't. They just spied. They thought you were very un-co-op-er-a-tive. They wished they could read your mind, but they can't get in with grown-ups."

"Thank God for that. We may beat them yet because of it, if we can keep you safe—and the other children."

"Are they bad, Daddy?"

"Yes, Joel. They're bad for us."

"I thought they were when he lied to you. He wasn't telling the truth, either, when he said they were going to live in Africa or Australia. They can't live on this planet in their own bodies. The atmosphere is wrong. So they're not just using our bodies to scout with. They're coming back to live in them, and all the others are coming, too, from the ships. And they're going to use the old bodies like mine and a whole bunch of new ones. And they're going to wait for us to grow up, they said, and then they'll take over . . .

"Daddy, I don't *want* him to come back in with me! Daddy, I'm scared!"

The child was shivering in his arms. The tiny arms clung to him. Joel began to cry, not like an infant, but like a man who has seen and felt too much and has to let go in gulping, smothered sobs.

Philip comforted him as best he could. But he had to ask one more question.

"Joel, boy," he whispered. "How many of them are there in the ships? Sixty? A hundred?"

The child blurted out the answer between sobs.

"Three million," he said.

Joel, exhausted, had fallen asleep and Philip tiptoed out of the room. He looked into the bedroom. It seemed inconceivable that Catherine could still be asleep, that he had left her just a few minutes ago. But she slept peacefully.

He closed the bedroom door again and went to the telephone. He dialed long distance. An operator came on after several rings.

"I want to make a person-to-person call to Admiral Randall Clarendon, in Washington, D. C. I don't know his number."

"Thank you." There was a long wait, then the operator

said, "I'm sorry, sir; we have no listing for any Admiral Randall Clarendon."

"But you must have. He's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"I see. Then his home number is probably unlisted. I can connect you with the Department of Defense."

"No, thanks."

He looked at the clock. A little after 1 a.m. A little after 2, Washington time. He'd get some sleepy duty officer at the Pentagon who'd never listen to a wild story about the JCS Chairman's grandson being infiltrated by an extraterrestrial.

He picked up the phone again and asked for Dr. Nils Bolstadt in Chicago. Bolstadt was the atomic scientist. Philip might have more success with a man who worked every day with the seemingly improbable.

But Dr. Bolstadt, when he came to the phone, was barely civil. He listened briefly as Philip began his explanation, then interrupted. He said Philip might not be a drunk or a crackpot but the chances were that he was. He had an average of two calls a week from members of the Anti-Atom Bomb Society, or from people with plans for hooking up baby atomic reactors to the house current, and if he listened to all of them he'd never have time to do any work.

"Just do one thing," Philip pleased. "This will prove what I'm trying to say. Talk to your son. Just talk to him and listen when he answers."

"I have two sons," Dr. Bolstadt said, "and—"

"The one who's just a year old. You must believe—"

"My sons are asleep, as I should be. I'm going to hang up now and if you ring again I promise you I'll have the call traced and report you to the police. Good-bye."

The connection was cut and Philip hung up in despair. He sat with his head in his hands.

"Daddy."

He went into the nursery. Joel was sitting up in his crib.

"Are you all right, son?" He had a moment of nausea when he thought that the alien might have taken over his son's mind again.

"Yes, Daddy. I woke up when I heard you telephoning. They don't believe you, I guess."

"No. I was crazy to think that they would. But I had to do something."

"Maybe I can help. I can talk to Georgie."

"Georgie?"

"Georgie Clarendon. His grandfather is that man in Washington, the Admiral. I could talk to Georgie tel-e-path-i-cal-ly, I think, and he could talk to his grandpa. The one who was in with me talked to the one who was in with Georgie and now that they're gone I think I could talk to Georgie without them."

"By all means, boy. Try!"

Joel stood inside his crib and set his face in a scowl of concentration. The minutes ticked by. Then Philip saw his son's lips move, as if he had made contact and was communicating.

"I woke Georgie up," said Joel with a little smile, "and first he thought it was a dream. Then when I explained to him, he didn't know he could talk. So he practiced a while and then went to wake up his grandpa." Joel sat down in his crib. "It sure made me tired."

"Do you feel all right otherwise, Joel?" His father looked at him anxiously. "You don't sense him—the alien—coming back yet, do you?"

"No," Joel said, then motioned his father to be quiet. "But Georgie's back." He sat in a listening attitude. "His grandpa is very surprised and he doesn't know whether he believes him."

"He's got to!" said Philip. "Tell Georgie to tell him about Dr. Bolstadt's son, if he needs confirmation. It'll take time, but we've got to convince him."

Joel nodded and concentrated again. Finally he said:

"The Admiral has a message for you. He says to tell you he's a professional skep . . . skep-tic, but he'd already had secret reports about something funny going on near the Moon's surface and he's checking back on them right away."

"Thank God," said Philip. He looked out the window at the Moon. It was in its last quarter and there was a star twinkling near the back of its crescent. The star belonged there. But there were things up there that didn't belong. Maybe radar had already picked them up. He hoped there was a tangible trace of the aliens—something more than just a series of conversations with an infant who sometimes spoke like a man and sometimes like a creature from an alien and hostile race.

Philip went to peer into the bedroom to see if Catherine was still asleep. She was. He

picked up a pack of cigarets and an ashtray on his way back to the nursery.

"What's happening now, Joel?"

"The Admiral's telephoning. He's made a dozen calls, I guess. Daddy?"

"Yes, son?"

"This is going to sound incon-gru-ous, but—could you change my pants? They're wet."

Philip laughed. He laughed a little louder than he should have, in that quiet threatened house, but he needed the partial release from the tension he'd been under for days.

"Of course, Joel." He picked up the infant and put him on his back on the top of the bathinette. "You don't know what pleasure it will give me to change your wet pants."

"Well, I can't help it," Joel said defensively. "Besides, they're a distraction."

"You're doing a man's work, son," Philip chuckled, "and the least you ought to have is a clean diaper."

Later, when he'd been pinned up again, Joel reported:

"Message from the Admiral. He says it's the damnedest campaign he's ever run. It may also be the most important war this country's ever fought, though only a handful of people will ever know about it. He's swearing you to secrecy."

"War?" said Philip.

"Yes. An aircraft carrier and an air force base are at battle stations. But he insists that you swear."

"I swear," said Philip. "Of course."

"They've sent up Lark V and Regulus missiles and a super-Nike from the base. Atomic warheads on all of them. Look at the Moon."

Philip took his son in his arms and sat with him at the window. Low in the sky, thin and cold the Moon rode, next to its companion, the star.

They watched. And waited.

Joel screamed. The infant body gave a convulsive jerk.

"Daddy!" the baby cried in terror. "He's back. He's trying to get in with me again! Don't let him, Daddy!"

Philip held the boy tight against him.

"Fight him, son," he whispered fiercely. "If you can just hold out . . ."

His eyes strained into the night as he willed the missiles up, up, faster, faster . . .

The baby voice gurgled to silence. When it spoke again it was no longer his son's.

"You fool," it said scornfully. "Did you think—"

At that instant there was a

pinprick of light against the dark area between the horns of the crescent Moon. Then another, and a third, and a dozen others.

The alien voice stopped, cut off.

"Daddy," Joe said weakly. "My boy . . . my boy."

Philip hugged the soft, shivering body to him.

"Message from the Admiral," Joel said faintly. "He says . . . it's the first war he ever fought in his pajamas."

Seconds later he was asleep.

Philip put him tenderly into his crib, on his stomach. Joel automatically drew his knees up under him.

Philip drew the soft blue blanket up to his son's neck. He patted the little rump, looking out at the serene Moon.

Catherine found her husband in the nursery in the morning. He had pulled an armchair into the room and was asleep in it, an ashtray full of cigaret butts on the chest of drawers at his elbow.

Philip woke with a start.

"What's the matter?" Catherine asked. She went to the crib. Joel was still asleep.

"Did he wake up during the night?"

"Little while ago," Philip said inaccurately. "He had a bad dream, I guess. He's all right now."

"You should have called me," she said. "Poor little fellow. I wonder what goes on in his little head."

"I wonder."

Catherine went to the kitchen and began to fix breakfast.

Joel opened his eyes. Philip went to him.

The child clambered to his feet and his father picked him up.

"Daddy," Joel said. "I . . . remember, but it's getting dim. It's all . . . going . . . away . . ."

"I'm glad, son. I'm very glad."

"Daddy, I . . . Daddy. Daddy. Da-da."

"Catherine," Philip called.

She came in.

"I think he said his first word," Philip said. "Say Daddy, Joel. Show Mommy. Say Dad-dy."

"Da," said Joel, concentrating hard. Then, triumphantly, pounding his father's shoulder with a tiny fist, "Da-da. Da-da!"

THE END

THE BIG BLUFF

By MILTON LESSER

There's more than one way to beat back an invasion from outer space. Try a little psychology on them —and if that fails, get out the old poker deck!

FOUR-MAN poker is not a good game, but we played because there were only four of us left on the Jamison Planet and no one except Fenner felt like twiddling his thumbs until the Chavorians arrived to close the first and final chapter of man's brief, audacious bid for the stars.

Fenner squinted as smoke from his cigarette curled up into his eyes. Fenner was a small, intense man with gaunt cheeks, a receding hairline and a long, thin nose which had been broken and twisted out of shape making him look somewhat rakish. "Well, now," he said in his reedy, piping voice. "Well, now." He studied his five cards carefully, pinching them into view one at a time at the corners and wincing visibly as each pasteboard glared back at him. Fenner probably thought everything in the world glared at him like that, sour and dyspeptic, as if in reflection of his own attitude. No one ever thought to ask Fenner why he had come to the Jamison Planet in the early days when the soil and the elements and the newness fought man's first and last starbound colony with unmitigated ferocity.

Bettylou Cummings scooped up her five cards in a quick, careless motion, surveyed them with the barest of smiles tugging at her lips and said, "I guess you always have a chance." Bettylou's reputation had followed her all the way out to the Jamison Planet, and although she'd disapprove of the epithets which went with it, she'd never fight them. She had what I'd call a good figure; not sensational, but good. She wore that perpetual half-smile on her lips and her small eyes

twinkled and said clearly, all the time, *things are pretty awful, but they could be worse.*

Starbuck flicked a light to his cigar with one big hand, bunched his cards together with the other, then let his cavernous mouth split into a broad grin. Everything about Starbuck was big and grinning, the huge hands, the loud clothing he wore, the gruff voice, the tremendous capacity for liquor, the frank optimism which had failed to wilt even on the eve of the Chavorian landing. Starbuck had reached the Jamison Planet four years after the colony had been settled, but his contagious good humor and self-assurance had made him our richest citizen in a matter of months.

Fenner opened the pot with the minimum bet; Bettylou saw him. When Starbuck doubled the number of chips in the center of the table and mouthed a platitude about separating the men from the boys, Fenner grumbled:

"Must you raise every time?"

Starbuck chuckled deep in his throat, then let it come out in a rumble. "If you can stay, you can raise, I always say."

With the Chavorians minutes—or at most, hours—away, I figured I could afford to take chances. "I call," I said and threw my chips into the pot.

Fenner folded his hand.

"You can't really tell until you see the cards," Bettylou admonished him, and called, "Give me one card, please."

I dealt her the lid, gave Starbuck the three cards he asked for, took three for myself.

"You're doing the betting," Bettylou told Starbuck, who was grinning like a gargantuan Cheshire cat.

Laughter still rumbling in his throat, Starbuck shoved the chips toward the center of the table. Since I hadn't helped my pair of eights I folded, but Bettylou called, saying, "Somebody's got to keep you honest, I guess."

Still grinning, Starbuck discarded his hand and stood up to stretch. "Darn you, Bettylou, there ain't no bluffing with a gal like you around. Fenner went running, his tail between his legs, Mike didn't draw nothing. I'd of figured for a look, only you—"

"You mean my two little pair win?" Bettylou demanded, gathering in the chips. "See what I mean, Fenner?"

The Chavorians drew closer, twittering among themselves.

Fenner grumbled.

"They win," Starbuck told her. "I got nothing."

"See?" Bettylou repeated. "You have to wait for the cards before you start complaining. Take those Chavorians now. . . ."

"I'd rather not talk about them," Fenner said distantly immersed in his bitterness. "It wasn't my idea to stay here."

"The men drew lots," I pointed out. "If four people couldn't be forced into the last ship even with a shoehorn, then four people had to stay."

"What gets me," Starbuck chuckled, "is Bettylou. She could of gone. She *wanted* to stay."

Bettylou shook her head. "I wouldn't say that; you've got it backwards. I *didn't* want to go home to Earth, Starbuck. I won't think the Chavorians are as bad as everyone says until I see them."

"It's our own fault," said Fenner morosely, climbing out of his funk to embark upon his favorite topic of conversation. "A civilization based on strictly ethnic or national lines has no business expanding itself like this. If the Chavorians didn't come along to demonstrate that, something else would have."

"It's my deal," said Starbuck, reaching for the cards. "We're gonna play all night if necessary, till Bettylou here falls for a bluff at least once." Starbuck settled himself comfortably once more; the chair creaked.

"Then you'll have to do it without me," Fenner said. "I can see no point in sitting here playing cards until the Chavorians come."

"What would you want to do?" I asked him, but Fenner merely shrugged.

"He'll probably go off in a corner and sulk," Starbuck told us matter-of-factly. "Well, every man to his own tastes, I always say. Here we go." And he offered Bettylou the shuffled deck for a cut.

"No, thank you," she said. "I'll quit, too. I guess I'm—well, excited."

"You're what?" Fenner scowled at her.

"The Chavorians. I wish they came already."

"What?" Fenner seemed amazed.

"Well, they *are* coming. Nothing we can do will stop them, so we might as well get it over with."

"They're liable to kill us all," Fenner pointed out gloomily.

Starbuck shook his head, puffing voluminously on the

stub of his cigar. "What for? Probably want to study us for a while, anyway."

"Perhaps the idea of being strapped down to an alien dissecting table pleases you. I don't find it amusing."

"He's got himself under the knife already," Starbuck smiled. "Imagine that." If you studied him closely, you could see that Starbuck's grinning optimism was beginning to wear thin around the edges. I wondered if he was making fun of Fenner to keep his own spirits up.

There was sullen, morose Fenner, waiting apathetically for the end; Bettylou with her uniquely feminine indifference; and Starbuck's optimism. Me? Strangely enough, I felt nothing. It was like existing in a vacuum. I had felt the same way in the late stages of the Fourth World War, double-timing into combat without feeling my boot-shod feet touch the ground, but I had remembered it well enough to head for the Jamison Planet after it was all over. With the Chavorians, there was no place to go, no place to hide, no new Jamison Planets for retreat. Earlier in the afternoon I'd stood out back of town and watched the last battered spaceship depart. Then I'd still felt things, then a lump had caught in my throat and I thought I'd go running out to the apron and yelling for them to stop. But at the last minute the ship's port had opened and Bettylou came outside smiling and she told Mr. Nikols to leave because Mr. Nikols had a wife and two children on their way home on an earlier ship and she had nothing.

He stood there and he cried, not looking back at the deserted town but looking at Bettylou and saying over and over, "Miss Cummings, Miss Cummings. . . ."

And when Bettylou had asked him, smiling, what he wanted to say, he sobbed and told her, "It's funny, my wife always said to keep away from you, you were no good." Bettylou had said, "You tell her the truth, Mr. Nikols, when you see her," and he had disappeared within the spaceship.

After it took off—so slowly you thought it wanted to stay and greet the Chavorians, then faster and faster until it disappeared against the pale blue sky—I just stood there, and that was when the numbness began to set in. But Bettylou had said, "It's going to get cold out here tonight," so we walked back together through the town's main

street with all its silent, forever closed stores and the trash cans gleaming on all the corners because we'd wanted to make the Jamison Planet a clean place. Pretty soon Starbuck had come thundering down the street after us, calling: "We might as well make a party of it, eh?" The three of us had found Fenner bitterly studying a book which was called *Earth: A Hundred Points of Interest* and had taken him, much against his will, to Bettylou's little place on the edge of town (she always liked to watch the farmers coming in every afternoon, she said), and started to play poker.

"You wouldn't have anything to drink, would you?" Starbuck asked Bettylou after we'd stopped playing poker.

She nodded, took a bottle down from a wall cabinet and offered it to Starbuck.

"Lord," he said, looking at the label, "this is good stuff."

"I've been saving it in case I ever got married or something," Bettylou said. "We might as well toast the Chavorians."

She got down glasses, passed them around. Starbuck poured and Bettylou said, "Here's hoping the Chavorians treat us better than we expect."

Fenner snorted and drained his glass in one fierce swallow, the small features of his face bunching around the long, crooked nose as he tried to shake off the burning in his throat. "How would you treat the Chavorians if they were here and you wanted this place, Miss Cummings?"

"Gee, I don't know."

"That's a good question," Starbuck declared, finishing his drink and thumping Fenner soundly on the back. "Say, you're all right. I tell you, though: if I wanted this planet and four Chavorians were waiting here I wouldn't decide to kill 'em right off, not till I saw them and tried to figure them out some."

"I don't follow you," I said.

"Well, if I came down and found four Chavorians cringing in a corner some place and waiting for my ax to fall, I'd probably chop off their heads, but if . . . Say, you're all right Fenner. Mind if I have another drink, Bettylou? There, thank you. What was I saying? Yeah, but if the Chavorians kind of stood up straight as could be and stared me in the eye and . . ."

"A human never saw a Chavorian," Fenner said. "We don't know what to expect,

except that history has always demonstrated suspicion comes first and understanding afterward. They'll kill us first, then try to figure us out."

"You don't get me, Fenner. I'm not talking about that. I mean it's sort of like a poker game where—"

But Starbuck never finished. There was a roaring sound overhead; Starbuck ran to the window. Bettylou followed him and so did I, but Fenner remained where he was, taking another quick, painful drink.

Bettylou yelled above the noise: "The Chavorian ship sounds like a big vacuum cleaner."

It did, in a way—like a vacuum cleaner ready to suck in the last four humans on the Jamison planet like four specks of dust.

Something huge and gleaming flashed into view, jolted to a stop fifty feet above the ground and then floated down like an immense feather.

The Chavorian landing made further discussion academic.

There are some times in life when you feel a little bit like God because you think you can tell just what a person's thinking merely by looking at him. It happens most of the time when you're scared, don't ask me why. We none of us went outside to greet the Chavorians; we figured we'd have a few minutes more of freedom if we waited for them to find us.

Fenner was sweating, and his thoughts were easy to figure. Recrimination, bitter hindsight. *Why did I ever come to the Jamison Planet?*

Bettylou smiled, almost. You could tell Bettylou alone probably wanted to go outside. And maybe she was wondering what the Chavorians looked like and hoping they'd be at least close to human. *I sure wish they'd find us already.*

Starbuck stalked back and forth across the room, caged and restless. *There'll be a way to sucker them. The universe doesn't consist of a few billion Bettylous.*

Maybe I'm wrong, but because I was so scared I didn't want to think about it; I thought about other things and what people were thinking and it made me feel better to think I was right.

"They're getting out of the ship, I think," Bettylou called from the window.

Starbuck ceased his pacing and crossed the floor ponderously to her. "Yeah," he said.

The Chavorian ship was a big sphere, oblate and gleaming silver. Now that it had landed I couldn't see any rocket tubes any place. We Earthmen always think spaceship means rocket ship, which is silly because the Chavorians came from someplace maybe halfway across the galaxy and who knows if they ever heard of rockets?

When I got to the window, a large round opening had gaped in the surface of the Chavorian sphere. Fenner stared glumly at the floor and didn't see the Chavorians come out.

Funny. Humans and Chavorians had never met until now. They'd contacted us on the Jamison planet by radio and at first we'd thought it was some Earthmen, for they'd spoken English. But no, they said, it wasn't English only we heard it as English so we could understand them. That impressed everyone the Chavorians must be pretty powerful, so when they told us after a while that they had colonies all over space and what did we mean by busting in on their territory, we radioed back to Earth and asked what to do. Run, they said. Get out of there, we're too far away and can't be responsible. After World War IV we were so weak the ants could have swatted us if they decided to take over the Earth. Get out while you can.

Four people couldn't. Fenner, Bettylou, Starbuck and me.

"Here they come!" cried Bettylou.

When you think of an alien race you somehow never think of size. Everything but size—color, shape, number of arms and legs, location of familiar organs, existence of alien organs, method of locomotion, a dozen other things.

"They're so—so tiny," Bettylou gasped.

"Looks like we've been conquered by a bunch of midgets," Starbuck agreed with her.

The Chavorians—six of them emerged from the spaceship—looked so much like people I thought I was dreaming. Midgets, I mean, because not one of them was more than three feet tall. But they all looked mean and ornery and gazed around our town on Jamison like they already owned the place. It got me mad, but of course there was not a thing I could do about it. In fact, right then Fenner's funk must have got contagious, for I didn't seriously think we had more than a few minutes left of life.

"Stop gawking around like that," Bettylou called cheerfully. Fenner looked like he wanted to kill her. "We're in here."

The Chavorians jumped like someone had cracked a whip under their feet.

"We ordered all of you to leave," one of them piped, and reached for a weapon hanging at his belt. They all got their weapons and advanced on Bettylou's house.

"It's English," Bettylou said.

Fenner shook his head. "How many times do I have to tell you? They don't speak English; we hear English. Some kind of thought transference. You see how advanced they are?"

"Come out," the same Chavorian piped. Apparently he was the leader, for they all bunched behind him and now when they talked you didn't hear English but a strange, musical gibberish. Apparently they could turn the thought transference Fenner was talking about on and off whenever they wanted.

Starbuck shook his head at the window. "You come on in here."

"You fool!" Fenner said. "Do you want them to kill us?"

"You're convinced they're going to do that anyway."

"You damn idiot! Let's go outside like they say and bow and scrape if we have to and maybe stay alive."

"You bow and scrape," said Starbuck. Then, louder: "If you guys want to talk a bit, come on in here."

The Chavorians held a conference, jabbering excitedly among themselves. When they finished, the little man up front demanded, "How do we know it isn't a trap? There are only a few of you and we're the van of a whole fleet of ships. You're desperate; you may be prepared to sell your lives dearly—although we could kill you merely by thinking of it. These weapons are only so you can understand our power. We don't need them, not really."

"Windbag!" Bettylou snorted quite unfemininely. "Who does he think he's kidding?"

"Don't be ridiculous." This was Fenner. "Every minute of life is precious. You're both trying to get us killed. Commit suicide if you want. *I* want to live."

And before we could stop him, Fenner plunged through the door and outside and threw himself at the feet of the first Chavorian. It wasn't easy, because when Fenner

got on his knees he still was as tall as the alien. Fenner finally managed it by scraping his face in the dust and it made me feel like hell.

The Chavorian placed a sandal-shod foot on Fenner's neck. "That's better," he piped. "The rest of you, come out. Hurry. We Chavorians are notoriously short on patience."

Starbuck glanced in my direction. "What do you think, Mike?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm too scared to think."

Bettylou patted my hand in a motherly fashion and that made me feel as bad as watching Fenner get down and grovel for the Chavorian. "Cut it out," I said. "I was only kidding."

"Sure, Mike." But Bettylou smiled. "We're all scared; we'd have to be crazy not to be. Fenner's way is one method of reacting. I think it stinks. I—"

"We can kill you without thinking about it," declared the first Chavorian. "We're losing patience." He kicked down on Fenner's neck and rubbed Fenner's face in the dirt. Fenner remained supine.

"We blot out whole civilizations as if they were small hamlets," said the Chavorian. "We murder cultures like insects. Spacefleets are pesky gnats to us. We of Chavor are mighty."

"What does he want, a medal?" Starbuck guffawed then calmly lit a cigar and blew smoke out through the open window.

The Chavorians took three steps back, leaving Fenner on the ground. "What is that stuff, poison gas? We warn you—" And the Chavorian let his voice trail off ominously.

"Sure," said Starbuck, smiling. "I manufacture it down in my chest. When I want to I can send it shooting off into space a few hundred thousand miles."

"Careful," said the first Chavorian. "We're immune to any of your crude poisons, naturally, but the mere idea of antagonism irks us. Back home we're called the Planet Slayers by subjugated races. Fear us."

Bettylou whisperd, "Ever since they started talking, they've been trying to impress us how strong they are. They are the advanced party, other ships are following. They destroy civilizations, murder whole races. If all this meant anything, why are they bothering with us? They could just kill us off and let it go at that."

"Just what I was thinking," said Starbuck.

"Maybe megalomania is a racial characteristic," I suggested.

"Meg—what?" Starbuck wanted to know, grinning. "You're getting as bad as Fenner. Them Chavorians are not any different from people. When they deal with each other or with us—hell, it's just like a good old-fashioned poker game."

The Chavorian piped, "If you don't come out, we'll kill you. Because you've never seen our power, we're being magnanimous. It won't last. You have three minutes to decide."

"So they're immune to our poisons," Bettylou drove her point home relentlessly. "They are skirting your foul-smelling cigar like it was plague, Starbuck. They're called the Planet-Slayers, eh?"

Fenner called, "Give yourselves up, I beg you. I recognize discretion as the better part of valor, but you'll get me killed."

"Obey him," said the first Chavorian.

"You know what I think?" Bettylou told us. "I think they're as bad as Starbuck here. I think they're bluffing. I could be wrong; it's just a snap judgement, I'll admit. But they sound like they're bluffing to me."

"If you think so," Starbuck chortled happily, "that's all I want to know. If I couldn't bluff you in three hours of poker, you just don't get bluffed."

"No. It has happened once or twice."

"Baloney. You were drunk or something. Well, them Chavorian midgets are about to find the ante's been upped."

"You have one minute remaining."

Everything had happened so fast after the Chavorian ship landed, I couldn't think straight. Were the Chavorians bluffing? I couldn't tell, not me. But Bettylou and Starbuck had made up their minds and my heart skipped a few beats. If they were wrong, we'd be dead in a minute. If they were right, I still didn't see what we could do about it.

"Please . . ." Fenner wailed.

Starbuck poked his head through the window and blew smoke rings. The Chavorians began to back away again, but Fenner blubbered, "He's faking. He's faking, I tell you. That's only tobacco smoke; couldn't hurt a fly, honest. Ask me anything, I'll tell you. I'll work for you, I'll—"

"I think we're overdoing it with that robot," Starbuck said in a loud but confidential voice.

"To be sure," Bettylou agreed.

"Next time we rig a robot up to greet an alien race, let me handle it, will you? That one's fawning so much, they'll never believe it. After all, them Chavorians may be primitive by our standards, but they're not that dumb. So next time let me do it, will you please? What a waste of time."

"Your three minutes are up," said the first Chavorian. "Out of there."

"Listen to him. Sometimes I think we ought to go back to our old policy of destroying alien races."

"And miss the benefit of new slaves?" Bettylou demanded. "I realize these Chavorians are small, but we could still use them for something, I suppose."

"What are you talking about?" Fenner protested. "Are you trying to convince them killing us is the only thing they can do?"

"Someone ought to shut the robot up," Starbuck said. "He isn't even a very good one. Why, hell—"

"Yes," said Bettylou, "anyone can tell—just *any*one—he's fake. That's one of the crudest robots Conquest Central's ever given us."

"If it stays out there long enough without care it will run down," I said, deciding to join the game because it had evoked nothing more than wide-eyed stares and some earnest whispering among the small Chavorians.

"They're lying!" Fenner shrieked. "I surrendered, you saw. I'll obey you."

"We really needed a more subtle robot," Bettylou said. "It just wasn't my fault, Starbuck."

"I guess so. Maybe the Chavorians want it. We'll render it harmless first, of course, but a cheap model like that isn't very valuable," I said while Starbuck, his back to the window momentarily, winked broadly at me and said, "I'll bet you'd play a better game of poker already."

The first Chavorian reached into a pocket of the loose robe he wore, withdrawing a small, switch-bladed knife. He bent and nicked Fenner's neck deftly. It could hardly have pained him, but Fenner writhed and screamed. A spot of blood appeared on his neck.

"Well," Bettylou exclaimed. "One of the old bleeding models."

"Wait'll I get my hands on one of the clerks in Conquest Central," Starbuck promised. "He's set our conquest timetable back fifteen minutes already. Hey, you! Hey, Chavorians!"

"What do you want? Your time is up and we should kill you. Why didn't you leave this planet the way you were supposed to?"

"That? We always make believe we're gonna leave. Kind of gets the enemy off balance, I always think."

"It's a rotten lie!" Fenner screamed.

"I'll wrap that cheap robot around the Central clerk's neck when we get home," Starbuck growled.

Bettylou shook her head at him. "Don't make any promises you can't keep. You know why they sent *us* here."

"Huh? Oh. Oh—uh, yeah."

"We're midgets," said Bettylou. "You're not much more than six feet tall, Starbuck. I'm even less. You wouldn't come up to the Central clerk's navel, and you know it. Just because the Chavorians are so small and puny, don't let it go to your head."

"Yeah, I guess so. But no internal squabbles here. I want to see what kind of slave labor them Chavorians are good for. Now that the rest of our ships took off to fool 'em and they're here, our guys should be coming back soon."

"I doubt if they're good for anything," I said. "Look at them. Small, scrawny, useless. Why don't we just kill them and forget about it?"

"Now, just a minute," the first Chavorian said. "They call us Planet Slayers. We're far from useless."

"That's what you say," Starbuck told them. "You're trying to save your necks."

"That's exactly what we Earthmen would do if we ever met a race more powerful than us," Bettylou declared. "We'd try to save our necks."

"Of course," I said. "That's merely hypothetical."

"Lord, yes!" Starbuck chortled. "There just ain't no race in the galaxy stronger'n us. We know, we met 'em all."

"We work better than you might think, indeed we do. We are very deft with precision instruments," said the first Chavorian.

"Naaa," said Starbuck. "All that stuff's mechanical with us."

The Chavorians seemed uneasy. They fidgeted, chattered among themselves, looked occasionally at their spaceship. The leader had removed his tiny foot from Fenner's neck

and Fenner crawled back into Bettylou's house, whimpering. Starbuck propelled him toward a corner with a well-placed kick, and Fenner just sat there.

"I'm getting bored with the whole idea," Starbuck went on. "It was a mistake. We ought to have killed 'em as soon as they got into contact with us."

"Yes," Bettylou agreed with him. "We disrupted everything to let them think *they* were doing the conquering, get them here, then decide what we could use them for. More than likely, the answer is nothing. They're about the most useless species. . . ."

"Maybe we don't actually want your planet," said the first Chavorian. "We could go and leave you here in peace. We *are* a magnanimous people, you see. Yes—"

Starbuck laughed so hard he began to cough. He flipped his cigar out the window and watched the Chavorians scatter. He called after them, "You never had any choice. Who said you could leave this planet? You think we're playing games?"

"We could go away and not get in your way, ever. I promise."

"Ain't that the limit? He promises. Hey, you! Keep away from that spaceship."

The Chavorians halted and looked back at our window. Starbuck leaned out and scowled at them. "Don't move till I tell you it's all right."

"For gosh sakes," I pleaded, "they want to go. Let them go before they change their minds."

"Are you kidding? I want to put the fear of Earth into 'em so we know they won't bother us again."

"See?" Bettylou demanded. "They *were* bluffing all along. This planet's good for us; they're smaller, but enough like us so it would be good for them, too. They're in the same boat we are—a long way from home and scared of their own shadows. We almost fell for their bluff."

"I say kill them," Starbuck shouted.

"We're beyond that sort of thing, really," Bettylou told him loudly. "It wouldn't gain us anything."

The Chavorians cringed and listened intently. "We're quite harmless. We were—well, you'll think this unbelievable—we were only lying about our—our power and conquests. We're more harmless than any race you ever met."

"Liars have a way of caus-

ing trouble," said Starbuck doubtfully. "I don't know—"

"These weapons aren't even real. We can't think people to death, either."

"Hell, now they're really lying!" Starbuck roared. It made the Chavorians cringe more. "Did you ever hear of a race that couldn't think people to death? Can't these Chavorians do *anything?*"

"See? They are harmless. And—well—I think they're cute, Starbuck," Bettylou said. "Let them go."

"Oh, yes. We *are* cute!" The Chavorians began to do acrobatic tricks, tumbling and twisting and applauding one another.

"That's terrible," Starbuck called. "I'll kill them now."

He leaned out in full view of the Chavorians and lit another cigar. He climbed out the window and started walking toward them.

"Stop or *I'll* kill *you!*" Bettylou cried.

Starbuck turned to face her and all the Chavorians began fighting and clawing each other as they struggled into their ship.

It had landed like a feather. It took off the same way.

"They won't venture into space for a long, long time," Starbuck predicted. "By the time they're ready to try us again, we'll have more than one small colony here."

"You were magnificent," said Fenner, standing up.

"Someone keep him quiet," Starbuck said. "Him I'll really kill."

"I'll radio the ships and tell them to return," Bettylou said.

"Fenner will be on the first freighter back to Earth, though," Starbuck told us. "Won't you, Fenner?"

Fenner looked at him, blanching. "Y-yes."

Starbuck reached for the cards and sat down while Bettylou went to the radio. "Want to play some?"

I grinned. "You wouldn't stand a chance any more?"

"Guess not," he said, and listened happily while Bettylou called the spaceships.

THE END

BY THE READERS

Sirs:

It stinks! Unless you present some issues like Vol. 2, No. 2, *Fantastic* will die as a cheap pulp mag.

Stanley L. Owen
7534 Wheeler
Detroit 10, Mich.

● *That's your opinion, pal. We'll continue to run the best stories we can get, illustrate them by artists with ability and imagination, and place them on the newsstands. After that it's up to the readers; and we think enough of them will plank down 35¢ each to keep the magazine in business.—Ed.*

Dear Howard:

Remember me?

It's been quite a while, come to think of it. If you'd given me up for dead, let me herewith return the compliment.

Believe it or not, I paid 35¢ for the December F just so I'd have some reason for writing this letter.

The editorial on page 4 was most heartening, especially since it comes on the heels of the news that FSF has discontinued all departments. I hope the letter columns of both F and AS will sparkle forever with brilliant missives and missiles.

The cover (for December) was nicely fantastic, but the

interiors (you please pardon me) stunk! Let's get back to the old hey-day of artistic excellence, with Sharp and Finlay and Beecham, etc.

The fiction seemed a bit flat, too; but, that might have been due to those illos (gad!). Don't worry too much about balance, but if a story is on the lengthy side it had better be good. 'Nuff said.

I hope we get some editorials, get rid of all these pen-names, and get going again. A suggestion: Now that Future Science Fiction is no longer running Bob Madle's excellent "Inside Science Fiction", why not get it for F? Also those book-review essays by Knight and deCamp? And if Rap's USF is gone, how about getting Rog Phillips to bring back the "Club House" to AS? In hopes,

Henry Moskowitz
Three Bridges,
New Jersey

● *Most of your requests have already been taken care of, Hank. We're firmly back to the tightly drawn and imaginative illustrations you and so many other readers have yelled for. Both* Amazing Stories *and* Fantastic *now run a readers' page, and the former is to feature both a column of fanzine reviews and book reviews—both conducted by one of the most cogent men in the business. Even the stories will, and are, getting a sharp boost up the ladder of quality—the kind of stories that move fast and contain action, characterization, and solid science fiction. Stay with us, Hank; you won't regret it!—Ed.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

I've finished the December issue of *Fantastic* and I thought "Water Cure" was the best story. "The Courtship of 53 Shotl 9G" wasn't worth reading but I read it anyway. I'm sorry I did.

Who wrote "The Vicar of Skeleton Cove"? On the cover you have it by Lawrence Chandler. Inside, on page 92 where it begins you have it by Ivar Jorgensen. So who did write it. I would guess Chandler but I would like to know for sure. I enjoyed it very much no matter who did the writing.

The front cover could have been better but all in all the

issue was okay. Keep the letter page now that you have one. I'm all for it.

Dan Adkins
General Delivery
East Liverpool
Ohio

● *Strange about the two stories mentioned in your first paragraph, Dan. Without exception, those who liked "Water Cure" couldn't abide Niall Wilde's story, and vice versa. One was action, sex and humor; the other a quiet, beautifully written story with character and atmosphere. That's the way it should be: something for every taste. . . . The Chandler-Jorgensen mixup came about when Chandler was assigned the job of writing a story around the December cover and his name put on it. The story he turned in, however, was from hunger; so we asked I. J. to do one. He came through with honors, so in all fairness we had to credit it to him, even though it meant a contradiction in the magazine itself. As you say, the important thing is that it was a good yarn. —Ed.*

Mr. Browne:

Just finished the February issue of *Fantastic*. That it is. I'm an avid fan of S-F from way back and believe myself a competent critic. Shall I evaluate your selections?

The cover: Connects with only one story, and then vaguely. Misleading . . . you indicate "The Day After Eternity" . . . the only reference to an antique auto was in said story, which was not a time throwback story after all. The only time throwback was:

Ourselves of Yesterday: Pretty good story. Sub-title seemed to indicate a much more drawn out story. The abrupt ending got the point across.

The Patty-Cake Mutiny: Gets my vote as the best. Do all the characters have to be equipped with nicknames? In this one the pilot was not in close association with the crew. A pleasant change.

The Gun: The plot was misleading at the end. Indicated the reporter and the kid might just be in cahoots . . . brought into light an imminent conflict of world powers.

The Day After Eternity: I wondered what sexy little Bettina Turner was doing with a scramble decoder and why she'd looked so guilty when caught putting it in her purse. I'm still wondering. Don't you scan this stuff before you buy it?

While My Love Waits: Is a goody too. I liked the way you (Henry Still) had him become his own "grandpa" at the end.

Cross Index: The Robot picked up the pencil and walked toward the President. He did not! The drawing leads one to expect the story to have a slightly different plot.

End of the Line: Pretty good too. The Cobalt bomb isn't supposed to burn the earth up; that's the myth preceding the H-Bomb tests. The C-bomb is reported to have lots of radioactive fall-out, thereby being in the category of poison.

Love That Potion: Science Fiction? Fiction that would sell anywhere. Leave that type out of S-F magazines.

Clayton Davis
Macdill AFB.

● *While we don't agree with your remarks on all the stories, Clayton, we've put them down as you wrote them. That goes for all our readers. Send us bombs or begonias—in they go, as written.—Ed.*

OKAY—IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU FEEL . . .

Sit down and write the editor a letter about it. He may not agree with you, but he'll print what you have to say. Address: *Fantastic*, 366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, New York.

(Concluded from page 35)

ian plane's own matter would at least remain constant.

Lar Okup's eyes were streaming tears as he used an Earth gesture and shook Mort's hand solemnly. Now there was time for Lu, who came into his arms and kissed him.

Outside, the snow had stopped.

That night, Mort had a dream. A dream—and not a dream. Someone was still watching him. A voice, droning and insistant, said: "Because you have discovered a plane of existence far vaster than your own, don't believe, Earthman, that you now have knowledge of everything.

"While the Arzians tried to kill you on Earth, we wanted to save you. For we knew you stood a good chance to develop the Cobalt Bomb. Preventing the flow of matter and energy from your Universe to the Arzian plane, your C Bomb would eventually strip Arz of every atom. You didn't develop the bomb, but others did. So the Arzians brought you here to nullify its effects.

"You did that for them. Know this, Earthman. As your world is sub-atomic for the Arzians, so there is yet a greater existence in which the entire Arzian universe is a small dull gray ball no bigger than your head.

"Our universe, Earthman —which is now starved for matter and energy from below because of what you have done. Unless our unwarlike people can be taught the secret of Cobalt science in a matter of weeks, we perish.

"Starrett of Earth, you will construct a transfer unit and come here!"

Mort awoke with a headache. Vaguely, he remembered a disturbing dream. It was something about—something about still being watched.

He would have to tell Lu about it. Of course, there was no one else to watch him. Clearly, it was impossible.

Still, his honeymoon here on Arz with Lu would have to be delayed. Something was buzzing around inside his head. An idea. A breath-taking new concept. If a man could build the transfer unit to work not from Earth but from Arz, there was no telling where it might take him.

There was no telling, not now.

But Mort knew he was going to find out. **THE END**

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

—Continued from back cover

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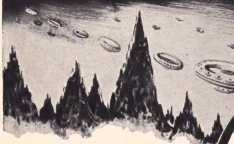

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